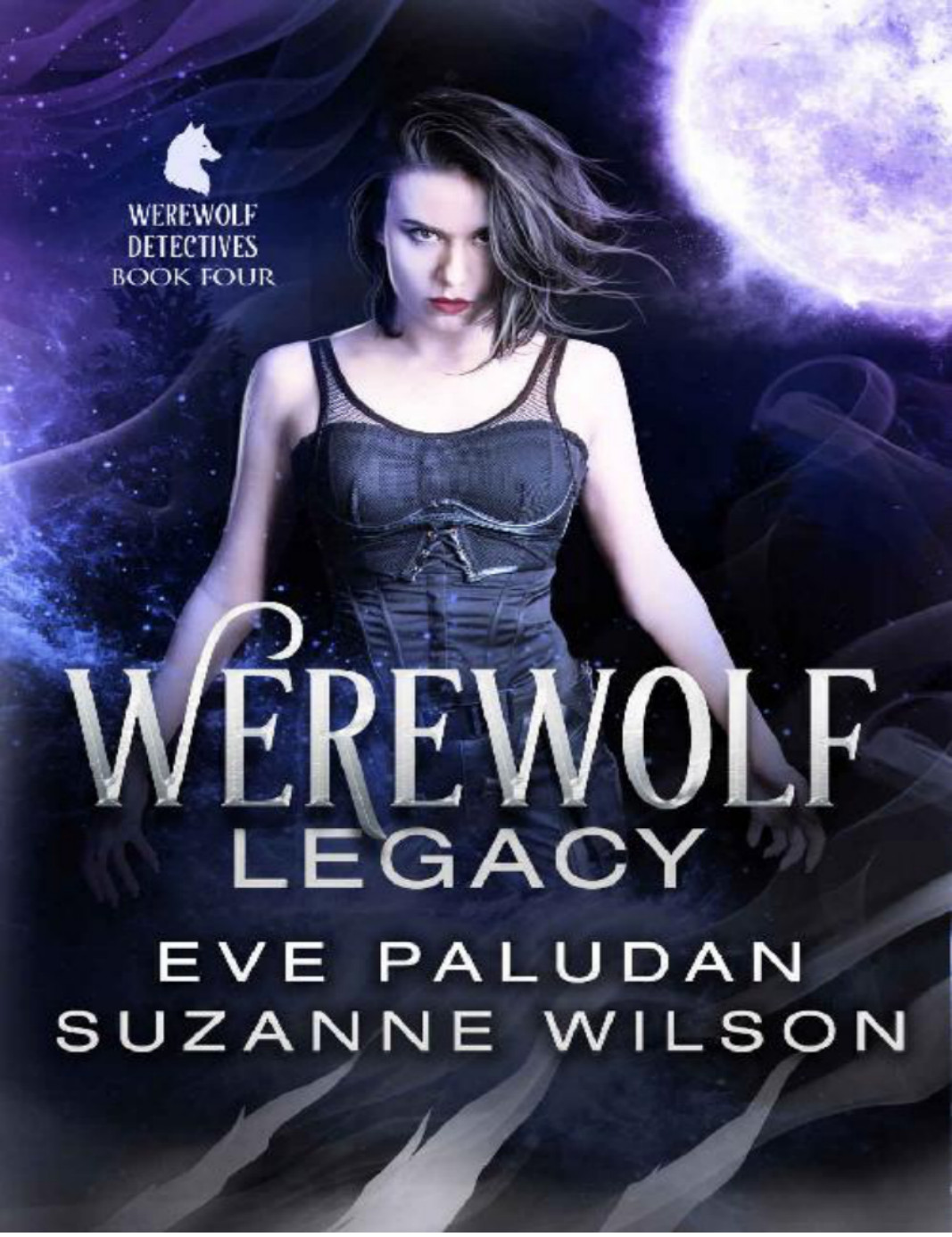

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WEREWOLF LEGACY

Werewolf Detectives #4

by

EVE PALUDAN
and SUZANNE WILSON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two

Reading Sample: Dead Ahead
About the Author

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Foreword
by J.R. Rain

Hi there and welcome to The Werewolf Detectives series!

I'm J.R. Rain, and I'm thrilled to introduce you to Karina, a werewolf who lives with her mysterious grandmother in the Russian-speaking community of West Hollywood. Ever since they came to the U.S. to escape werewolf hunters, Karina has been forbidden from running with her old pack.

But when tragedy strikes close to home, fate throws her right into the path of a police detective with a dark secret of his own. Together, they are the only ones who can save her werewolf pack. As Karina comes into her own as a new private investigator, her dangerous cases from the pack draw her ever closer to her destiny!

The Werewolf Detectives is an exciting paranormal mystery series created by best-selling authors Suzanne Wilson and Eve Paludan. In this world, there are two kinds of werewolves: those who are born into it, and those who are made into werewolves. What's not to love about a female werewolf who experiences love at first bite?

If you're intrigued by alpha women who aren't afraid to run with werewolves, you're sure to enjoy a howling good time with The Werewolf Detectives.

Return to the Table of Contents

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Werewolf Unleashed

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Chapter One

Karina wrinkled her nose as an overpowering chemical smell hit her nostrils and made her eyes water. She stood in the ransacked bedroom from which Ivan's wife, Tatiana, and their son, Abram, had been kidnapped.

"There's a weird, unpleasant odor in here," she said. "I've never smelled it before. And I say that as a werewolf whose nose has smelled thousands of stinky things."

Ivan nodded. "I noticed it, too. I wonder what it is."

"It smells similar to camping stove fuel," Jack said. "It can knock someone out or kill them if it's used indoors."

"My God, the baby," Karina said, horrified. "I hope Abram wasn't harmed."

Jack opened the window all the way, even though it was chilly outside. "Whew. Let's air out this place. I'm getting a headache." Jack checked out the bedroom's window seat, and noticed some scrapes down the outside of the windowsill. "A ladder might have made these marks."

Karina asked Ivan, "Do you guys keep a ladder around?"

"Yes, and it is capable of reaching this window. We use it to clean leaves out of the rain gutters. But we usually keep it locked in the little garage in the back yard, along with some simple tools like hammers and screwdrivers."

Igor, Ivan's twin, came through the doorway of the room, surveying the scene. "How does a person get to a second-story window, pry it open and remove a woman who is also an Alpha female werewolf—and her young one—without making a sound to alert any of the other ten people inside the house?"

"Not just ten people, but ten werewolves were here during their disappearance," Ivan said, noticeably upset. Karina could tell that the pack's Alpha male was ready to snap.

"Igor, we were just talking about the weird smell in here."

"That same smell is downstairs, too. What is it?"

"We don't know yet," Jack said, "but we need to air out the house. Maybe even have everyone leave for a day or two."

"Jack was saying that it is possible that a chemical, whatever it was, was used to knock out everyone in the house," Ivan said to Igor. "Even me."

"It's just a theory. But if it's true, that means they would have had to pump the smell throughout the house and come in wearing gas masks," Jack said. "I pray to God that they put a gas mask over the baby's face before they snatched him."

Karina gasped. "There was a lot of stealth involved. We need to

figure out what we're dealing with. Human, werewolf, vampire, or maybe even a spirit. A wraith. Or a witch."

"A witch? Here? Would she dare?" Ivan blurted.

Karina said, "That's what we're trying to figure out, Ivan."

Jack shook his head. "If that's what happened, that everyone in the house was gassed with something, I would start thinking less about supernaturals and more about some sort of spy-versus-spy scenario. Has anyone in this house ever been—I hate to even say it, but—a Russian spy? Or has anyone ever been involved in the Russian mafia? Maybe even KGB?"

Karina shuddered. "Jack, this is our *pack* you're talking about. How can you even ask that?"

"Because this situation just reeks of one of those things. It's very Cold War-ish."

"Profiling much, Jack?" Karina asked gently.

"Yes, sorry," he said, looking sheepish.

Ivan and Igor looked at each other and Igor closed the bedroom door. "I've never been a fan of some of the Danilov pack that blended with ours after some trouble in their home country."

Ivan said, "Igor, they can hear you. Werewolves are like walls with ears."

"I don't care. I think Jack is right. We have to start looking at this as a possible inside job. Or some accomplice inside the house."

"Is anyone missing from the house right now or otherwise unaccounted for?" Jack asked.

"Some of them were out looking for Tatiana and Abram, but I sent them out," Ivan said. "It wasn't their idea to go traipse through the neighborhood."

"That makes sense," Karina said. "Igor, would you gather the pack, so we can start narrowing this down?"

"They should all be back by now and in the living room. I'd like to speak alone with my brother while you speak to them."

Karina nodded. "Jack, are you ready to go speak with the others?"

Jack glanced at Ivan, looking like he had something else to say, but had decided against it.

"I'm ready," he said, dropping back and following Karina out the door. As they stepped away, the door closed.

Karina and Jack walked toward the living room.

"Did you smell a strange odor in there?" Jack asked her.

"Many strange odors and that's putting it mildly," she said. "I can't place it, though. At first, I thought maybe the diaper pail was full."

Jack shook his head. "That's not it, but I can't place it either. What *is* that smell?"

"I don't know." Karina stopped walking before getting to the stairs

and said, “I hope Igor is sensitive to Ivan’s needs.”

Jack put his arm around her and said, “Igor’s been an ass from day one, as far as I’m concerned. But let’s leave them be and go talk to the rest of the pack.”

They walked down the stairs.

***

Back in the bedroom, Ivan continued to stand with his back to his brother. Igor went to him and put his hand on his shoulder. Ivan did something then that he hadn’t done since they were small and had lost their parents. He turned and enveloped his brother in a hug.

Igor could be a jerk. He could make people hate and despise him if he wanted, and his outlook on life was mostly negative. But the one thing Igor never wavered on was his love for his brother. He held him while Ivan cried, letting him get it out of his system, knowing that when the tears were spent, Ivan would be left with anger toward the kidnappers—anger that would empower him to take action.

***

Downstairs, Karina and Jack found Natalya, Hannibal, Peter, Dasia and the rest of the Danilov pack in the living room. Ela was there as well. The atmosphere was grim, and even Natalya, who lately had been prone to smoking things that induced a temporary euphoria, was subdued.

Jack and Karina stood before them.

Jack spoke. “There are scrape marks on the outside of the windowsill of Tatiana and Ivan’s room. I’ll need to climb up outside with a ladder and get a better look before I’m able to figure out exactly what caused them. But the point is that it doesn’t look like it would have been a quiet process. The wood is scraped off in chunks in places, and even the glass of the window is scratched.”

“It’s a raven,” Natalya said.

“How do you know that?” Karina asked.

The girl shrugged. “I hear it a lot, at night. That’s why no one paid attention to it, I’m sure. We’re used to it. Ravens and wolves have been symbiotic for thousands of years, so we don’t think of them as a threat.”

“Have any of you ever seen this raven?” Karina asked them.

They all shook their heads.

Karina asked, “But you’ve all heard it, during the day and at night?”

“Not in daytime,” replied one of Peter and Dasia’s pack. “Only at

night."

"Have any of you heard it during the day?" Again, they all shook their heads.

Karina looked at Jack. "If it's a raven, shouldn't it be out during the day?"

Jack shrugged. He really didn't know much about them.

Karina said, "Do you mind if I have a quick look at the other windows?"

He told her, "Go ahead. I'll finish here." Addressing the pack once more, he said, "I'd like to establish a timeline. When was the last time any of you saw Tatiana and the baby?"

Hannibal raised his hand as if he were in school.

Jack was used to his oddities by now. "Yes, Hannibal?"

"I saw Tatiana eating lunch about noon in the kitchen. The baby wasn't with her. She said he was sleeping. She had chicken. There were only four pieces left, and she ate them all. There was no chicken left and I had to eat the lunchmeat. I don't know why they're really allowed to call it meat."

"*Aypak!*" Natalya said.

Hannibal looked hurt.

"Natalya," Ela said, giving the girl a stern look, "I don't think there is a need for name calling."

"Suddenly, *you're* the den mother?" Natalya snapped.

"What did you call him?" Jack asked Natalya.

"She said I'm an idiot." Hannibal pouted. "She calls me that all the time."

Jack sighed. He had such a hard time getting used to the juvenile atmosphere in this place the pack called a den. It was just a rundown house filled with werewolves who were unemployed. Except for Ivan, who was an artist. For the sake of the destitute immigrant Russian werewolves, Ivan had taken in the Danilov pack. They were a bunch of homeless strays that he supported with his art.

"You're not an idiot, Hannibal," Jack said, as if trying to pacify a child. "And Ela is right, Natalya. Name-calling is not going to help anyone. We're a pack, and we need to unite to save two of our own."

Natalya nodded, but gave Hannibal a disapproving look that didn't need translation. He had to remember to ask Karina later what the deal was between those two. There was so much animosity in the room and it was more than testosterone.

"Natalya, when was the last time that you saw Tatiana?" Jack asked.

"This morning, early."

"How early?" Jack asked. Natalya seemed to always want to be difficult.

The girl shrugged. “I don’t know. The baby’s cries woke me and then, I heard footsteps on the stairs. I saw Tatiana pass by. She went into the kitchen, or maybe the art studio, and then came out a while later and went back upstairs.”

“Was the baby with her?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, as if she were thinking about it. “I wasn’t really awake, but it sounded like the baby was crying, upstairs.”

“Was Ivan upstairs, with the baby?” he asked.

Natalya looked bored now with the questioning and didn’t answer. She just shrugged in that Russian way.

Peter said, “No, Ivan was painting in his studio all night. I saw him come out after the sun came up.”

“Did you see Tatiana today, at all?” Jack asked.

“No, I saw Abram, though. Ivan brought him down at about two. He said Tatiana needed to take a nap, so Dasia and I played with the baby for a while.”

“Did Ivan stay with you while you cared for the baby?” Jack asked Peter.

“He was in and out. He was working on something in the studio, I think.”

“He’s working on something bad,” Dasia said.

Peter and Ela both looked at her as if she’d said something she wasn’t supposed to.

“What do you mean, working on something bad?” Jack asked.

“I-I shouldn’t say, but maybe I should. Anyway, it is evil,” she said, looking nervous.

Jack noticed that the rest of the pack looked nervous as well.

“What’s going on? I’m trying to help. Ivan asked Karina and me to come here, to help find his missing wife and child. We are, whether you like it or not, a part of this pack, as well as professional private investigators. As well, I have a long police career behind me before I became a werewolf. So, let’s cooperate and stick to the facts.”

Karina nodded. “That’s right. We can’t help find Tatiana and the baby without your help. We need you to be honest with us. And forthcoming. I’m sure that Ivan won’t mind you telling us things that may lead to finding his wife and baby. But think how upset he would be if you held back some piece of information that we may need to find them. Their lives are on the line. Start talking. Someone!”

Dasia looked at Peter.

Karina saw that his eyes had turned amber as he said, “I will tell him.”

Dasia’s eyes turned ice blue. She loved Peter, and he loved her. Whatever it was that they were hesitant to say had them worried

enough that Peter would rather take the fall for it than have it left on Dasia's shoulders.

Peter finally said, "Yesterday, Dasia was looking for me. I was out running with Hannibal. I hadn't told her I was going, and when she woke up, she heard terrible noises in Ivan's art studio. She was worried about me. I should have awakened her and told her I was going. Anyway, she did something that we have all been forbidden to do. She went into Ivan's studio without his permission. As soon as she opened the door, she said the noises stopped. She saw something then, it was a painting of—" He stopped there and looked back at Dasia. Her eyes were wide and she was shaking her head. She didn't want him to say it.

Jack went over to him, and unafraid of the possible fleas in the sofa, he sat next to Peter on the filthy couch.

"Peter," he said, "I can tell that you're worried about telling us what Dasia saw in there. None of us are here to punish or judge you. We are here to save two of our own who desperately need our help. Time is critical. For every minute, every hour they are missing, the chances decrease that the two of them will be found alive."

Peter squirmed. "Don't you think I know that?"

"Good. So, if whatever she saw in there will help us find Tatiana and baby Abram, then one of you should tell us, now." He looked over at Dasia.

She was pale, and looked practically incapable of speech.

Karina wondered what could be so bad that had them so worried?

Peter finally swallowed hard. "It's a painting of Karina's grandfather. It's called up his spirit. His evil spirit."

There was a collective gasp among the pack.

Jack looked at Karina, and she looked shocked.

"Okay, Peter. Go on," Jack said.

Karina could tell he was trying to maintain a sense of calm among them. He had been a cop for a long time. He was good at what he did. He was especially good at keeping his cool during an investigation.

Jack looked at Dasia. "Now, what I need you to do, Dasia, is tell me about the noises you heard coming from the room. What type of noises were they? Was it voices, bumps, bangs? What did you hear? Think."

"I don't know," she said, tears forming now in her eyes.

Ela was sitting next to her and she put her arm around the girl. "She's afraid of what Ivan will do to her if she tells."

Karina said, "That's ridiculous. Ivan has never laid a hand on a woman in anger. He may be Alpha, but he's not going to hurt you."

"No, but if he tells Igor to deal with me…" Dasia's voice trailed off and Karina already knew that Igor was more than capable, and

willing, too, to take out his temper physically, on either sex. The twins were like Abel and Cain. Day and night.

Karina went over to where Dasia sat. “No one wants us to find Tatiana and Abram more than Ivan. He’ll forgive you for telling us if the information you give us helps us. And if he sets Igor on you, you call me and I will deal with him myself.”

Dasia’s eyes were filled with fear. Her hands were folded in her lap but still trembling. “It was chanting and howling and moaning. I don’t know how to describe it. It was just awful, and I couldn’t find Peter and I thought he was hurt.”

Peter reached over and took her hand. “Shh, baby. It’s okay.”

Karina could tell that he was feeling guilty for having left without telling her and putting these events into motion. She looked at Jack and no words needed to be spoken. They both knew that they had to get into that studio.

Jack finished interviewing the rest of the pack. The others had caught a glimpse or two of Tatiana and/or the baby throughout the early part of the day. It seemed that after Hannibal saw her eating the chicken, no one but Ivan had seen her.

Peter said, “Ivan came out of his art studio around three or four and took the baby back upstairs. That was the last I saw of Abram. Ivan came back down and returned to his studio to work, not coming out again until Igor knocked to tell him about dinner around six.”

Jack said, “Then what?”

“He had gone upstairs then, and came back down minutes later, yelling for Tatiana. We all searched the house for her and the baby, and then, when she could not be located, we checked down at the corner store where she sometimes goes. She was not there. And the stroller was at home. She never takes Abram anywhere without it because he gets heavy and she tires of carrying him.”

“And then?” Karina asked.

“Then Ivan called you, Karina. Help us.”

She tapped her index fingers together. “Okay, there were about two hours where Tatiana and the baby were unaccounted for, so that at least gives us a fairly accurate timeline. Does anyone have anything to add?”

Silence.

“Thank you all,” Jack told them. “You’ve done well.”

Hannibal raised his hand again.

Jack suppressed a smile. “Yes, Hannibal?”

“Is there something we can do to help find them?” the boy asked.

“Not yet,” Jack replied. “We’ll be sure to let you know if and when there is.”

Karina walked over toward the studio and was standing, looking

at the door. When Jack walked up next to her, she said, “There are dents and scrapes along the outsides of the other windows, too. Natalya may be right about the raven. I will have to research it. I’ve never heard of them coming out only at night.”

“What’s all this fuss about ravens?” Jack asked. “It’s a bird, not a kidnapper.”

“Nobody wants to say it aloud. There have been times when vampires, hundreds of years ago, would shapeshift into bats or birds, and steal our children.”

“Vampires? No one told me anything about vampires when I became a werewolf.”

“Like I said, Jack, it hasn’t been an issue for hundreds of years. But who knows now? We have no suspects yet, and I think we have to start looking for a supernatural enemy that can get into an upper-story window without a ladder. Something, or someone, that flew. Hence, a vampire.”

“This is just great,” Jack said. “Vampires? But even if something flew, that doesn’t explain how someone or something would break into a house full of werewolves and kidnap two people, one of them a grown woman, without anyone seeing them or hearing them. It doesn’t make sense. We all have acute hearing and sense of smell.”

“I know,” she said.

“What do vampires smell like?” Jack asked.

“Like portabella mushrooms,” Karina said. “I have never smelled one, but Babushka has and she told me once, that is what they smell like.”

“Mushrooms. That’s not the smell upstairs,” Jack said.

“No, it wasn’t,” she agreed. “What do you think about what Dasia and Peter said about the painting and the spirit of my dead grandfather lurking around the painting? He was very powerful in life. In death, who knows?”

Jack frowned. “It’s strange, and coincidental that this frightening event with the spirit happened just prior to Tatiana and Abram being taken. It could be a coincidence and maybe even a warning from beyond the grave, if we believe in such things. I’m not sure I do.”

“I do,” Karina said. “We need to go in the art studio and see for ourselves.”

“Not without my brother’s permission.” Igor had done what he did best, sneak up behind them. Their powers of smell didn’t work as well here as they did other places. The smell of werewolf and the stench of filth hung heavy in the air in the “den.” The place reeked of werewolf hormones, even to the very wallpaper, as if someone had been scent-marking in the house.

“Igor,” Jack said, calmly. “Dasia heard things in there the day

before Tatiana and the baby were taken. The art studio would be almost directly underneath Tatiana and Ivan's room. Don't you think it would be wise to inspect it?"

"I do," Igor said, "with my brother's permission."

"I'll talk to him," Karina said. She gave Jack and Igor both a look, pleading with them to play nice until she got back and then, she went upstairs to find Ivan. It wasn't hard because he was standing where they had left him. He was staring out the window, but his eyes had a glazed look.

"Ivan," Karina asked softly. "How are you holding up?"

He looked at her, his blue eyes filled with tears. "This is my fault, Karina. I did this."

Karina went over and gave him a hug. "No, Ivan. Don't say that. You have done nothing but love and care for your wife and child."

"You don't know the full story," he said, flatly.

"Then tell me. We need to know the truth, in order to help you."

Ivan turned away from her and with his back to her, he said, "I called him. I unleashed him! I didn't mean to."

"Who did you call? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Rasputin, your grandfather," he said. The name, spoken aloud, startled her. "I invited him into my home, and he accepted. Now, my Tatiana and my Abram are gone. It's him and his evil, I know it is."

"Ivan," Karina tried to stay calm. "What do you mean, you 'invited' him?"

"We needed money, Karina. No one here is working, and what pittance they get on public assistance does little to pay the bills. I was commissioned to do a painting. It was a large job, for a lot of money. I should have said no when I realized what the painting was about, but I have a family to take care of now. She gave me an advance."

"Who would even possibly want to commission you to paint a portrait of Grigori?"

Ivan looked at her and said, "No, not of Grigori Rasputin, Karina. The client wanted a painting of Tsar Nicholas II and his daughter, Anastasia." He whispered, "Your grandmother. I painted her," and then put his hands over his face.

"Oh, my God," Karina said. "You put my grandmother's face in a painting for a client? Without asking her?"

"Yes."

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Chapter Two

Karina was still staring at Ivan when Jack walked in. “Who wanted a painting of what?”

Ivan said, “I was contacted by a member of the Russian consulate. She said she is based out of the consulate in San Francisco, but she has a home here in Los Angeles, in the hills. She saw my paintings in a gallery downtown and she wanted me to do a painting for her. I met with her the week before we went to the observatory. She said she wanted a portrait of Tsar Nicholas II and Anastasia. I should have been suspicious.”

“I’ll say!” Karina said angrily. “You just put Babushka in danger.”

“Let him speak, Karina,” Jack said. He nodded at Ivan to continue.

“She knew from my name that I was a Russian artist and that I would likely know who the Tsar and his daughter were. Not that everyone doesn’t. I should have talked to Babushka or you, Karina. I didn’t see the harm in it and she was offering me enough money to support the pack and my family for a very long time, half of it up front, so I agreed.”

Jack asked, “And then what happened?”

Ivan raked his hands through his wild hair. “The night before last, I began the painting. I had painted the outlines, just a brush sketch as I always begin paintings, using as a model, a rare color photograph I found in a book of the two of them. It was a beautiful photograph. She was dressed in a white dress with a pink sweater and a white hat and gloves. The Tsar was in uniform with his tall, black boots. They were outside, standing in front of a cluster of trees. I thought it would be perfect for what this woman had asked for. Once the outline was on the canvas, I went to bed, intending to work more on it the next day.”

“And then?” Jack asked.

“I was still in bed, when I heard these noises coming from underneath our bedroom, in my art studio. Tatiana was asleep next to me, and Abram was asleep in his crib next to her. I thought someone was in my studio, so I went downstairs.”

“Who was down there?” Karina asked.

“I could see Dasia, Natalya and a few of the others asleep in the living room as I quietly walked by. I went to the studio and found the door locked. I was confused, as I hadn’t locked it. The pack knows not to go inside that room. It is my territory only.”

“Dasia was asleep?” Jack asked him.

“Yes, why?” Ivan asked him.

“Go ahead and finish, that’s not important right now.”

“I got the key and I came back down and opened the door. At first, it didn’t look like anything had been disturbed. I thought maybe

someone had been in the kitchen making the noise, and that I was only being paranoid. But then I saw it—"

"You saw what?" Karina wished he would stop dragging this out.

"My painting was no longer the simple outline of the Tsar and his daughter, Anastasia." Again, he paused.

Karina thought the anticipation of it all was going to make her explode. Before she yelled at him, he continued, "It was of Anastasia still, but standing next to her in the portrait was also Grigori Rasputin. His ghost."

Karina gasped, unaware that she had done so.

"You think a ghost changed your painting?" Jack asked him, his voice laced with doubt.

Ivan looked at him hard. "Funny how you stand there as a werewolf and continue to doubt that the supernatural exists in other areas."

"I don't doubt you, Ivan," Jack said, although there were many times when he found himself wishing that he did. "A ghost, Rasputin's ghost, may well have changed your painting. But those scratches outside this window are fresh and I doubt they were created by a ghost who doesn't need prying tools to get inside."

"But perhaps a raven? Or a vampire disguised as a raven?" Karina interjected.

"Maybe," Jack said, dismissively. He was so used to looking at things from a strictly mortal sense that although he tried hard, he had a hard time seeing the abstract. He went on, "Someone took Tatiana and Abram from this room somehow, right?"

"So, one is unrelated from the other?" Ivan asked.

"I didn't say that either, but we have to have a connection before we accuse her of anything. I need the name of this client who commissioned you to do the portrait, and I need to know how to contact her."

"Jack, I will take you to her," Ivan said.

"No, Ivan," Jack said. "You're too close to this. You need to stay here and wait. Maybe someone will contact you. Maybe this is just a ransom kidnapping, and not connected to the painting at all."

"Look at how we live, Jack. Would any kidnapper think that we'd have a penny to pay in ransom? I won't stay here and twiddle my thumbs while who knows what is happening to my wife and son. My Alpha son."

"He's just a baby, Ivan. Not Alpha this or that."

"You're mistaken. This is important in our world. And in this room, I'm the Alpha, Jack. Not you. No matter how Alpha-like you may feel, you are not in charge of this investigation. I will go with you, or I will go alone. I will leave that choice up to you."

Jack looked at Karina. He could see in her eyes that she was urging him to go along with Ivan, at least for now. “Okay, let’s go. But I’m driving. You always drive like a car like you just stole it.”

Ivan actually smiled. He looked at Karina. “Whatever it takes to make him feel Alpha-like, I guess.” He said, “You may drive, Jack.”

“I’ll get in an Alpha contest with you some other time,” Jack said, disgusted.

“What should I do while the two of you are running around town arguing over which is the tougher, smarter werewolf?” she asked, annoyed by their constant displays of testosterone.

“Karina, you should stick close to Babushka,” Jack told her. “I’ll call you when I get a lead. We are done in this house. Somewhere out there, Tatiana and Abram are being held against their will.”

“Sure, I’ll go straight home, lock the door and babysit one of the most powerful werewolves I know,” she said a little sarcastically. “You forget that this is my pack, as close as family and also, that I’m a licensed private investigator, too.”

“This is very dangerous.”

“Which is exactly why I should be on this case as your partner. You need me.”

“True.” Jack knew she wasn’t going to go home, but he would have to deal with that later. One wild werewolf at a time, he thought, as he kissed her on the cheek and then followed Ivan out the door.

“I’ll go check on Babushka anyway,” Karina acquiesced.

Karina went back downstairs. The pack was still sprawled around the living room. They were all anxious and upset over Tatiana and the baby being gone, but none of them knew what to do, or how to act, without Ivan’s direction.

“Where’s Igor?” she asked.

Ela pointed toward the studio. Karina found him standing in the doorway, looking at Ivan’s painting. When he realized she was behind him, he stepped to the side so that she could see it as well. Her Babushka, but as a young girl, was only a little more than an outline on the painting. But the man that stood next to her in black robes and full beard was a finished portrait and was definitely Grigori Rasputin.

“I know Ivan didn’t paint Rasputin,” Karina said.

“How do you know that?” Igor asked.

“Those brush strokes, that art style, is not his.”

“Do you think the spirit of Grigori Rasputin is here?” Igor asked her.

Karina shook her head, “I don’t know.” Then she noticed the book splayed open, with the photograph in it that Ivan had been actually painting. He was right, it was a beautiful picture. Babushka had been so young and so beautiful. Karina picked up the book and put her

hand on Igor's shoulder. "I'm going to see Babushka. The rest of you wait for Ivan before you go do anything, okay?"

Igor said, "I wish I could defy you, but I don't know where to begin looking. If I did, I would be there. This is breaking my brother's heart."

"We'll find them, Igor. Jack and I are on the trail now. We need the pack to stay out of our way until we need them for backup."

He nodded, but his eyes were sad.

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Karina remembered when she stepped out on the rotted wood of the front porch that Ivan and Jack had taken the car. She looked at her phone. It was eight o'clock. It would take her about an hour to get a bus to Babushka's house. She dialed Babushka and it was answered on the first ring.

"Hi, Babushka!"

"What is wrong?" Babushka asked, with no greeting.

"I'm fine, thank you, Babushka. And yourself?"

"Karina Nosova, do not toy with your grandmother. Tell me what terrible thing has happened. And tell me now." Babushka was spooky sometimes, the way she knew that something was dreadfully wrong.

"Tatiana and baby Abram are missing."

Babushka gasped. "Kidnapped?"

"It seems so, but in the back of my mind, it was such a quiet abduction that I have to wonder if Tatiana went willingly. Not that I could discuss that possibility with Ivan, or with any of the pack, until we have evidence one way or the other. Whether she ran off, or was kidnapped, it's up in the air right now."

"This is terrible. Either way." Babushka paused. "What do you know so far?"

"Jack and Ivan have gone to interview a woman that Ivan has been painting for—on commission. What Ivan was painting may interest you. I'll tell you more when I get there."

"I'll get the tea leaves ready," Babushka said.

Karina hung up. She walked to the bus stop and while she was waiting, she sent Jack a text, telling him where she would be.

As promised when Karina got there, the tea leaves and Babushka were ready. There was also fresh coffee and baklava on the side. Karina kissed her grandmother's cheek. "I don't know how you do it all, Babushka."

The old woman smiled and said, "I'm not just a werewolf. I'm a witch, too, remember?" She sat at the table and opened the book that belonged to Ivan's mysterious client.

“Do you remember having this picture taken?” Karina asked.

Her grandmother sat down in the chair next to hers.

“Yes, I remember this. Of course, we had many portraits taken of us in the golden days. We were the royals.” Babushka used her finger to trace the lines of her father in the photo, tears in her eyes. “My father was a handsome man, wasn’t he?”

Karina put her hand on Babushka’s. “Yes, he was. And look at how young and beautiful you were. Not that you aren’t just as beautiful today.”

“Ah, to be that young once again and know then what I know now. I do remember that day. We were all there, the whole family. We’d just had tea in the garden and the photographer was taking photos of us. My father told him, ‘Be sure to get one of me and Princess Anastasia. Just the two of us.’”

“Were you a daddy’s girl?” Karina asked.

“Very much so. I wanted our photo to be taken in front of the big Norwegian spruce trees that were the source of great pleasure to him as they provided the material to brew spruce beer, a favorite of his. We did not have many fruits in winter, and that spruce beer may have prevented scurvy. Even the wood was special and used to make balalaikas.” She looked up at Karina. “What does this photo of me and Father have to do with the disappearance of Tatiana and the baby?”

“Ivan was painting a commission from this photo for a woman from the Russian consulate when Tatiana and Abram disappeared. We don’t know if there’s a connection, but I thought I would ask you to tell me if there is one.”

“First of all, there is no Russian consulate in L.A.”

“I didn’t know that. So obviously, she was not who she said she was.”

“Right. What is her name?” Babushka asked.

“I don’t know. Ivan says she has a home here in L.A. Jack has gone with Ivan to meet her and hopefully, get the rest of the details. But that’s not all. While Ivan slept, someone or something altered his painting. Where your father stood in the photo is now Grigori in Ivan’s painting.”

Babushka furrowed her brows. “It’s *him*, I think.”

“Grigori? You think he’s back?”

“In spirit. I’ve felt his strong presence lately. The spirit of a werewolf can be very strong if called back to the mortal world. I think he’s always been here, *malyutka*. He can’t, or he doesn’t know how to communicate, but I felt him the other night when we were fighting Dmitri.”

“What do you think this means? Tatiana and the baby were taken right after this odd thing happened to Ivan’s painting. Do you think

the incidents are related?"

"Let's see what the tea leaves tell us."

Karina silently watched as Babushka set things up. She already had the tea leaves and hot water in a pot and two plain, china teacups and saucers set out. She opened the pot, so that some of the tea leaves could flow into the cup as she poured the tea. Once both cups were full, she gave one to Karina and she took the other.

Karina had done this before. She picked up her cup and drank from it and Babushka did the same. Then both of them being right-handed, they held their cups in their left hand and swirled it clockwise three times. As the tea leaves moved toward the lip of the cup, they each asked a question.

Karina asked, "Who has Tatiana and Abram?" and Babushka asked, "Is the spirit of Grigori here?"

They turned their cups upside down on their saucers, allowing the remaining liquid to drain. Then Babushka watched the second hand on her clock, allowing seven seconds to pass. She and Karina each flipped their cups and sat them upright with the handles facing toward them. Then they both looked into the cups.

Babushka frowned that Karina, after all of these years, still didn't know what any of it meant. She had several long stalks of tea leaves in her own cup and one short stalk. There was one she wasn't sure how to describe. It was slanted. There was another clump that looked like an arrow—it pointed to a shape that looked almost like a face with two horns on top.

"Babushka? Is it bad news?"

Babushka tipped her cup in Karina's direction. There was no liquid nor any tea leaves in it. "Before we began drinking, there were three stalks floating on top that warn of a visitor who will come in three days."

"That doesn't answer your question about Grigori," Karina replied.

"Sometimes the tea leaves tell you what you need to know, rather than what you want to know."

"What about mine, Babushka?"

Her grandmother looked into the cup. "The long stalks represent men. The short ones represent women. The slanted one represents someone untrustworthy."

"What about this on the right?"

Babushka looked into her granddaughter's eyes. "The arrow means danger and evil."

A knock at the door startled them. Karina looked at Babushka. Then she said, "It hasn't been three days yet, so it's probably just Jack."

Babushka let Jack in and when he saw Karina's face, he asked,

“What’s wrong?”

She gave him a hug. “Babushka’s been reading the tea leaves. She’s going to have a visitor, and from what I can tell, Tatiana and the baby were taken by three men, at least one of whom is untrustworthy.”

“Tea leaves tell you all that?”

“I’ll tell you more later. What did you and Ivan find out?” Karina asked.

“Nothing, really. Ivan told me that her name is Angelina Ivanov.”

Babushka interrupted him, though she wasn’t looking at Jack. She was staring at the far wall of the dining room. She whispered, “Angel, messenger, son of Ivan.”

Jack looked at Karina, confused again.

“Babushka?” Karina said. She, too, understood what the woman’s Russian name meant, but she was worried because the old woman’s face had gone so pale. “What is it?”

Babushka looked at Jack. “The woman who commissioned the painting wasn’t there, was she?”

“No one was.”

“Is the address legit?” Karina asked.

“There’s a house there. Almost a mansion. But it looks abandoned. I’ll check the county records tomorrow and find out who owns it.”

“She knew that Ivan would come looking for her, but her name, it’s not real. Her name was a message,” Babushka said.

“What’s the message?” Jack asked Babushka.

“That Ivan’s son will be a messenger.”

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Chapter Three

After another late night, Jack and Karina had both gotten up and gone to work the next day. As much as they wanted to spend all of their time looking for Tatiana and Abram, they both had work to do. Jack was still following the guy that was a person of interest in the murders of two prostitutes. The D.A. was still trying to build a case against him, and Jack was on rotation with two other detectives who were tailing the perp around the city to gather enough evidence to arrest and charge him.

As Jack sat parked along Wilshire Boulevard, he watched the front door of a law office on the other side of the street. He had only slept for three hours before getting out of bed and heading to Wilshire Boulevard at 3:00 a.m. to get that exact parking spot.

The other detective on duty before Jack had given him a head's up that the guy had an appointment with his attorney first thing in the morning. They had a listening device in the guy's car, and although not exactly legal, it had come in quite handy along the way of their stakeout. If they got enough evidence on this guy to prosecute him, the listening device would of course be denied as, "What listening device? That's not ours."

The side of the street where Jack had been blessed enough to find a parking space, even at three a.m., put him in Santa Monica city limits. The guy he was watching, who had just walked into his attorney's office, was standing in Brentwood.

Jack sometimes longed for Minnesota, where the lines of the cities and counties were clearly defined. Several times, while working as a cop in L.A., he had chased suspects into areas of the city that suddenly put him into another jurisdiction.

He hoped they nailed this guy. Jack hadn't had to view the bodies of the girls the suspect had "allegedly" killed, but he'd seen the pictures. The girls had been hung from a hook somewhere and he had tried to drain their blood. He had done a very poor job on the first one, and a less-clumsy job on the second. Their bodies had, somewhere along the line, been held in a freezer, which they still hadn't found either.

Jack, and some of his colleagues suspected that the sicko had been watching old episodes of *Dexter* and fancied himself somewhat of an "ice-truck" killer. The only thing they had on him so far were eyewitness accounts from two prostitutes who had seen him pick up the girl and one pimp who asked for "immunity" from future crimes if he agreed to testify to what he told them. Jack had to chuckle when he thought of that. The guy had to be given at least a point for trying.

The man, Justin Browning, lived with his wife in a gated

community in Brentwood. They had three children, one of whom roomed at USC. On the surface, Justin Browning had an ordinary life. He worked in a production studio in Century City as an executive. The production studio made films from famous children's books. They were made for DVD-only films, so the guy wasn't like a Pixar-level executive, but the business apparently made decent money, considering where he lived, the way his family dressed and the cars that they drove. He had picked up the girls he'd killed in a light-blue Lamborghini.

"Moron," Jack said aloud as he thought about it. "Just tie a big sign around your neck with your name and address as you pick up a hooker, why don't you?"

Unfortunately, however, a search of the expensive car had turned up nothing. It had likely been professionally detailed before they'd obtained the warrant. The man's wife claimed he was with her on the night of the girls' disappearances and he had hired one of the top attorneys in the L.A. area. The suspect's attorney immediately set about getting injunctions for them to stop "harassing" his client.

That was what Jack was here to do. And even as distracted as he was by what was happening with the werewolf pack right now, he kept the dead girls' photos on the seat next to him, so that his focus stayed on his paycheck job. Except for one phone call that he needed to make. He called a woman he knew at Vital Records, a woman he used to date when he was mortal.

"Hi, Lisa," he said after exchanging pleasantries. "I was wondering if you could look up something for me?"

"Sure, Jack."

He gave her the address of the property that was purportedly Angelina Ivanov's and asked her if she could check on who owned it and maybe when the last time the utilities had been turned on or off, and call him back.

She called back within minutes and said, "It belongs to a non-profit corporation out of Russia and is connected to a church. I don't know how to pronounce it, but it means 'Messenger of the Lord.' The utilities haven't been on there in over ten years."

Jack thanked her and hung up, wondering what the church, or a company belonging to it, would want with Tatiana and Abram.

***

Karina had slept a couple of hours longer than Jack. Her first order of business when she woke up had been to call Ivan. When he didn't answer, she called Igor. "Is Ivan okay?"

"I don't know, Karina. He left after Jack dropped him off last night

and he just came back about an hour ago. I think he was out running in the hills. He was dirty and disheveled when he got in. He wouldn't talk to me. He went to his art studio first and I heard him cursing and tearing things up, but I left him alone. Then he stormed out and went to his room. He's been locked in there since. But Karina, when I went in the studio after he came out, there were paintings of—"

"Grigori?" she interrupted. His first name made the pack less nervous.

"Yes, there were paintings of him everywhere. That was what my brother was ripping up, but there must have been a hundred of them."

"My God," she said.

"I don't think God has anything to do with this," Igor said. "I'd actually guess it was more about his rival."

Karina thought about the head in the teacup that had horns on it. Her stomach did a flip-flop.

"Call me if there's anything you need, or anything I need to know, please."

He said he would and Karina hung up and called her grandmother.

"Babushka, good morning. I just wanted to make sure you were well."

"I'm as spry as a chicken," her grandmother said, making Karina smile. She chose not to tell her anything more about the paintings, for now. She knew that the mention of Grigori Rasputin always upset her. But Babushka was not to be fooled, as usual. "What is it you don't want to tell me?"

Karina laughed. "No wool pulled over your eyes, is there, Babushka?" She repeated to her what Igor had said.

"He's restless," her grandmother said.

"Ivan?" Karina asked, misunderstanding.

"No, Grigori. I think he wants to tell us something."

"Then why doesn't he just tell us, Babushka?"

"The dead don't speak. They can only lead us to what we need to know, but sometimes that is a difficult task."

"I'll go to the den and look at the paintings later today," she told her grandmother. "I have a client coming into the office in an hour."

"You go to work and do what you need to. I will go to the den."

"It can wait until I finish my business this morning, I'm sure."

"*Nyet.* If Grigori is going to tell anyone anything, it would be me. I will go. Stop worrying about me as if I'm on the verge of being put into a nursing home. I'm a werewolf. Even old werewolves are a hundred times stronger than an ordinary human being."

"You're right, Babushka. Be safe. I love you."

"I love you, too. Just know this: Grigori would never hurt me, dead or alive."

Karina hung up thinking that she hoped Babushka was right.

Traffic was, as usual, congested on her way to the office. Her client, Uri, the carpet-cleaning guy, who was Babushka's sort-of boyfriend, was waiting for her outside when she got there. Karina had also had to park six blocks away.

"Hi, Uri. I'm so sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Parking in this neighborhood is terrible."

"Good morning, Karina. It's okay, sometimes, I'm late for my appointments because the parking spot gods decide to work against me."

She smiled and unlocked the office door. She asked him to have a seat while she got her computer booted up, and made a pot of coffee. When all of that was done, she sat down and took out a pen and pad. "So, tell me, Uri, what is it you need a private investigator for?"

"First, I want you to know that I'm not the nosy type. When I clean my client's carpets, I only go where they ask me to and I don't snoop around."

She smiled. "I believe you, Uri. Please don't worry, I'm not here to judge you."

"Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "Well, I have a client who has his carpets in his living room and hallway cleaned every month. He only wants the living room and hallway downstairs cleaned, and nothing else. He pays me good, so what do I care? What is strange to begin with is that he has no children and no pets that I have ever seen. But his carpets are horribly stained every time I go to clean them. I have to use the strongest cleaners on them to get the stains out. Sometimes it looks like blood, sometimes only dirt and sometimes, it has a strong urine smell."

"That's gross," she said.

"It is. The other strange part is that he has no furniture in his living room when I come. He says he moves it for me, but there are no marks on the carpets where heavy things should have sat."

Karina was making notes, but other than the "sometimes it looks like blood," he hadn't said anything truly worrisome. It sounded like the customer was a slob, though.

"It probably sounds like I worry for no reason," Uri said, as if reading her mind. "But two weeks ago, I needed to use the bathroom. I don't usually do that when I'm in a client's house, but I had tea that morning in the park while I was playing cards. It came out of a thermos, and I should have known anything that came from this man I play cards with may be questionable. Anyway, I drank the tea and excuse me, Karina, but my bowels were in agony later in the day. The owner has grown to trust me so sometimes he runs errands while I'm there. That day he was out."

“You discovered something?”

“Yes. When I went down the hall to what I thought was the bathroom, I found it locked. I realized that maybe he didn’t trust me all that much. Out of an old man’s desperation, I went upstairs. I found the bathroom, but on my way, I smelled this stench. I did my business and I honestly intended to go straight back to work. But Karina, my dear, that stench. I had only smelled that once and it was on my uncle’s farm when I was a child. A herd of his cattle were slaughtered by an angry rival—that’s another story, but the pile of carcasses smelled the same as what I smelled in this house.”

“Did you let the police know, Uri?”

“I made a mistake. As I passed back by, I tried the door to look in. It was locked, but before I let go of the knob, the owner caught me. He was furious and for a moment, I feared for my life. I told him I was looking for the bathroom, but the door at the end of the hall was open, so that was a very weak lie. He said he was going to call the police and tell them I had stolen things. I told him that was a lie and wouldn’t hold up. He reminded me that although he had only hired me to clean his downstairs, my fingerprints were upstairs. He said he has insurance on many of his valuables that he kept in that very room and they could ‘disappear’ before the police got there. I work here on a visa, Karina. If I get in trouble, they’ll send me back. I don’t want to go back.”

“I understand. Okay, so you left after that altercation two weeks ago. Have you been back?”

“No, he hasn’t contacted me and I haven’t called him. But I can’t stop thinking what if the smell was something bad. If I wish to be an American, I need to act like one and get involved when there is an injustice. But I’m still afraid to call the police, so Ana—your grandmother—said I should see you.”

“I will look into it for you, Uri. Don’t worry, I won’t bring your name into it at all, okay?” she told him with a reassuring smile.

“Thank you, Karina.” He gave her the man’s name and address and a description of him. She had him sign the normal contract for her services and she went over the details with him. He gave her a retainer check. After he left, she went online right away to look up Uri’s client’s name to see what she could discover.

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Chapter Four

Babushka knocked on the door and stood on the rotted wood porch of the werewolf pack house, wondering if she would fall through it.

Natalya answered the door and invited her in. The house was a disaster as usual and the pack members were all still lying around when she arrived, after ten in the morning. Babushka looked around the place and clucked her tongue in dismay.

"Natalya, I knew your parents. They would be appalled that you live this way."

Natalya looked embarrassed and said, "I was going to clean today. I swear."

Babushka then looked at the others and said, "What about the rest of you? Is there something you have to do more pressing than help Natalya clean this pigsty? Shouldn't Tatiana be able to bring her son home to a decent home when they are found?"

They all got to their feet then and suddenly, trash was being picked up and cleaning products were gathered from the kitchen cabinet under the sink.

Babushka chuckled and headed for the art studio where she found Igor and Ela.

Igor was picking something up off the floor when Ela touched him on the arm and said his name softly. He stood up and turned around.

"Hello, Igor," Babushka said.

"Hello, Babushka. What can we do for you?"

"I would like to look at the paintings, please. Alone."

Igor nodded and took Ela by the arm, leading her out of the studio.

Babushka stood there, looking around her. There were shelves all around the room that held both painted and unpainted canvases. Ivan's wolf paintings stared down at her with their bared teeth and yellow eyes. On the lower shelves were the paintings of Grigori. They were so fine and detailed that if one didn't look closely, they appeared to be photographs.

In all of the paintings stood her own fourteen-year-old image, as well. In them, she was smiling, as she had that day with her father when they had posed for photos together near the spruce trees. There were still many torn paintings on the floor as well. They were all of the same subject, but Igor had been right when he'd told Karina that there must have been a hundred of them.

Babushka went over and closed the door. She stood in the center of the room and closed her eyes. Holding out her arms she said, "Grigori, what do you need to tell us?"

In the rest of the house, a sight that had never been seen there before was taking place. People were cleaning everything. The house smelled of bleach and pine cleaner and dish soap. The scents wafted under Ivan's studio door. It was just about the time he also heard a great deal of commotion in his studio. He jumped up and ran down the stairs, first stopping for a moment to take in the peculiar sight of his pack cleaning and then rushed toward the studio.

Igor stopped him before he went in. "Babushka is in there. I think she's trying to connect with a spirit. She wanted to be alone in there. It is her right, as the portraits are of her."

Ivan nodded and turned back toward the cleaners and with blurry eyes, red and sore from crying and lack of sleep, he said, "And what is going on in there?"

Igor smiled. "Babushka has worked her magic on the pack to make them clean up this pigsty."

"Must be Babushka's iron hand," Ivan said. "Maybe she should be Alpha."

Igor laughed.

***

Jack saw the suspect come out of his attorney's office and head west, on foot, down Wilshire Boulevard. Jack knew that he had parked in a garage two blocks away. He wondered if he should get out and follow him on foot, or take a chance that he would be able to maneuver his car through the morning traffic. He decided on trying the foot route. He locked up his car and waited until the light changed and traffic had stopped once again before jogging across between the cars. Once on the other side, he took the same route the man had. He could no longer see him, but he had the receiver with him for the tracker they had put in his car. If the suspect gave him the slip, he'd be able to find him again once he got into his car.

Jack made his way to the parking garage and went inside. The bottom floor was quiet and he only saw two people but no Lamborghini. He took the stairs to the second level and then the third, before he finally saw the man. He stood out of sight and watched him.

The man was on his phone standing outside of his car. There was an echo in the garage, and between that and the sounds of the cars pulling in and out, Jack couldn't hear what he was saying. The man finally ended his call and Jack almost turned around to go back to his own car, thinking the man was leaving. Instead, he watched him take a black bag from the trunk and he walked toward the exit where Jack was now hidden.

Jack ran back to the bottom of the stairs as quietly as he could and

he waited and waited, but the man didn't come out. Cursing, he ran back to the second level just in time to see the man driving down the ramp in a red BMW.

"He changed cars!" Jack cursed as he watched the man drive away. Jack's boss was going to be ticked off. Very ticked off.

***

Before starting on Uri's case, Karina took just a moment to look up something online. Ravens were rarely active at night. They typically did their best work as the sun was coming up in the morning. It was what she had suspected, but she had needed to be sure. She did know of something that did its best work at night, but she didn't want to think about that now. She switched gears and typed the name Uri had given her into her people-finder software. She waited a few seconds while it loaded, and bingo, there he was.

The man Uri cleaned carpets for was a cameraman for a film crew that shot documentaries. He didn't have a criminal record, but she did find one civil suit that had been filed against him, three years prior. It had been filed by another man and the complaint alleged that Uri's client had killed three dogs belonging to the other man. It looked like they had been neighbors at the time but not in the house the man lived in now.

The neighbor alleged that the man was constantly complaining about his dogs making too much noise and getting loose and digging in his yard. He said the man had threatened on more than one occasion to "shoot them."

The dogs had eventually been found dead. They hadn't been "shot" with a gun. Instead, they had been injected with some type of poison. This was proven because the man who filed the complaint had paid for pet autopsies. He had taken that evidence to the police, but the police had told him they'd talked to the neighbor and he'd denied any involvement.

Without an eyewitness, or evidence that the neighbor had been the one to poison the dogs, there was no way to prove he had anything to do with it. They had refused to pursue it any further. The man had then taken it to civil court where he had lost again.

Karina thought this wronged neighbor might be a good place to start. She wrote down his name, Stephen Samuels, and his address. Then, she turned her "Will be Back" sign around to face the street before she locked and left her office.

***

Ivan knocked on the art studio door. He couldn't hear anything coming from inside now and he was worried.

"Babushka? It's Ivan. Are you okay?"

The door opened and the old woman stood before him. She looked fine, but the studio was an even bigger wreck than it had been before she'd gone in.

"I'm fine, Ivan," she said, placing her hand on his face. "Grigori knows something about your family. He's trying to tell us so."

"Should I talk to him? What should I do?"

"I have wished more than once in my life that I could talk to him again. Unfortunately, the dead don't talk, Ivan. He seems restless—whatever he has to tell us is urgent. I will try another route and let you know. I'm proud that you aren't running wild around the city, looking for your loved ones."

"I would be, but I don't know where to look. I ran in the hills last night, and I explored the property around the house that my client said she lived in—the one who commissioned the painting. There was a strange smell there, something I couldn't put my finger on. But I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. The run felt good and it released some anxiety, but it didn't solve anything. Now I feel like I'm going to explode."

"My poor boy," she said in Russian. "Can you promise me one day to try and figure this out before you do something impulsive that might cause us all more grief?"

"I can promise to try, Babushka. I don't know what to do with myself in the meantime."

Babushka smiled and said, "Follow me."

Ivan followed her to the kitchen. She took a sponge off the sink and handed it to him. "When I am stressed, I clean. It helps."

Ivan grinned at her. She was the only person on Earth that could get away with even suggesting that the Alpha male clean the pack house. He kissed her cheek and said to her in Russian, "I love you like my own grandmother, but if you tell anyone I cleaned this kitchen, I will kill you."

Babushka touched the side of his face again and smiled.

***

Karina found the address she was looking for and parked her car. It was a condominium complex, and one had to push a button in order to have the homeowner access the gate from inside. She pushed number 601, and a man's voice said, "Yes?"

"Hello," Karina said into the intercom. "My name is Karina Nosova. I'm looking for Steven Samuels."

“This is him. What do you need?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir. I’m a private investigator and I had some questions for you about your former neighbor, Nate Klein.”

The gate buzzed and the man’s voice said, “Go straight past the pool and turn left next to the vending machines. I’ll be the first building on your right.”

Karina did as he told her and before she could knock on the door, it was pulled open. She was greeted by a well-dressed man of about thirty with black hair and dark eyes. He was quite attractive, Karina thought.

“Mr. Samuels?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry, Miss Nosova, but before I ask you in, would you mind showing me some identification?”

“Not at all.” She took out her wallet. She removed her license and credentials and handed them over. He examined them for a moment and then said, “I apologize again, but this is a crazy city. I am careful who I let in.”

“You should be.”

“Please, come in.”

She entered the clean, well-furnished condo. “I’m a big believer in being better safe than sorry.”

“Thank you.” He offered her a seat, which she took, and a drink, which she politely declined.

He sat down. “What has Nate the Terrible done now?”

“He hasn’t done anything new that I know of. I was wondering if you could tell me more about what happened with your dogs.”

He looked sad. She could tell by the look in his eyes that the pain was still fresh. He reached behind him to a table and opened a drawer. He pulled out a photo album and handed it to her. He said, “Their names were Curly, Moe and Zack.”

Karina did smile at that.

“Zack, huh?” she asked as she flipped through the book.

“Larry was his predecessor. He passed away of old age, so we retired his name.”

“They were beautiful,” she said. Curly, Moe and Zack had been Pomeranians, and she wasn’t just sucking up to him that they had been very pretty dogs. In the photo, one was snow white, one was red and the third was a soft brown.

“Thank you,” he said. “I thought so, of course. They were my babies, and their murders were devastating to my partner and I. We even split up over it. The grief put too much of a strain on our relationship.”

“Do you mind telling me what happened?”

He put a hand over his heart for a moment. “My babies were not

quiet. I will readily admit that. They were loud when they barked. They only barked, though, when someone or something disturbed them. If there was a knock on the door or a commotion next door, which there was often, they barked like crazy. Or as Nate said, they yapped."

"What kind of commotion do you mean?"

"I never figured out what it was exactly, but there was always weird scraping and tapping noises going on over there. It almost sounded like there were rodents in the walls. I reported it to the management, and they had a pest service come out. They didn't find any evidence of rodents or termites or anything else. Nate the Terrible cussed me out for 'inviting trouble' by calling them out.

"I was confused about that. What trouble would having the place looked at cause? Anyway, the noises continued and of course, when I wasn't home to distract them, my little loves barked. The maniac would knock on the wall and my door and stir them up even more and then, he started to make threats. I reported him, but the police just slapped him on the wrist with a warning and went on their way. Then one day, I came home from work and found them all dead." He looked like he might cry and Karina was sympathetic.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Samuels. Is this too hard on you?"

"No." He wiped a tear from his cheek. "I want justice for them. I found them inside my house right in front of the door in a pile, so someone had to put them like that for me to see. It was so sad. Somehow, that man got into my home, killed my babies and got out without breaking anything or disturbing anything else."

"What a heinous crime."

"It was! I had them autopsied. It was awful, knowing they were being cut apart for the autopsies. It broke my heart, and my partner, Lee, didn't speak to me for days afterward. But I had to know. The veterinarian said they had injection marks in their necks. They had been given high doses of some type of sedative." He sobbed and said, "Why would anyone want to harm my sweet babies?" Then he collapsed in a torrent of tears.

Karina didn't know what to do. So she just sat quietly until he finished.

Then he said, "I'm sorry. It's still painful."

"It's okay. I'm sorry for your loss," she said. "Mr. Samuels, when did Mr. Klein move out?"

"When I found out the police wouldn't do anything, I filed the lawsuit. It was about a year ago when I went to court on it. The pig didn't even have the decency to show up. He just sent his expensive attorney. The judge dismissed the whole thing, saying I didn't have any evidence that he had done this. He moved out, though, about a

month after. That was a blessing, for me, anyway."

"Who was it not a blessing for, sir?" she asked, catching the last part of his statement.

"The homeowners' association. The carpet had to be pulled up and replaced and they said there were holes and scratches along the walls. I knew all along he was a pig."

"Did he own the condo?" Karina asked.

"Yes, he sold it back to the association. I heard they paid a lot less than they would have to pay for, say, mine. But it was to recoup finances on the things they had to replace and renovate. It's rented out now to a very nice couple."

"Good. One more question, Mr. Samuels. Do you think the homeowner's association took pictures of the damages?"

"I'm sure they did. I can give you the president's card if you like."

"Please," she said with a smile.

He went to his desk, rummaged for a moment, and drew out a business card. After he gave her the card, she thanked him again and told him again she was sorry for his loss.

They said goodbye and she left.

Once outside, she called the number on the card. The president of the HOA, a man named Hank McAlpine, answered and told her he'd be happy to meet her, but he was out of town until Friday. Today was Wednesday. Karina made an appointment with him for Friday afternoon before hanging up.

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Chapter Five

Karina and Jack had planned to spend the evening having a quiet, romantic dinner, catching up on the day's events and then going wherever that led. It was not to be, however. Babushka had called all of them. She wanted the entire pack to meet at the den at seven. No one had the nerve to defy her, so they were all there.

When Karina and Jack stepped in the door, they were stunned. If Karina hadn't known better, she would have thought she was in the wrong house. It smelled like bleach and Pine-Sol and even the walls were washed and gleaming.

"What happened here?" she whispered to Igor.

He laughed and said, "Babushka told them to get off their asses and clean so they did. You should have seen our Alpha male scrubbing cabinets in the kitchen."

"I would have given a million bucks to see that," Jack said.

Karina sniffed the air. "Careful, dear, I'm smelling testosterone again."

Babushka was already here. Karina and Jack both kissed her cheeks and then started to take a seat on the clean cover that someone had put over the ancient couch. Babushka stopped Karina, however, and said, "*Malyutka*, I need to speak to you alone first."

"Okay." Looking at Jack, Karina raised her eyebrows. "I'll be right back."

Jack made awkward conversation with Peter and Michael, another pack member that Jack had seen before, but had never formally met until now.

Ivan had sat in a chair in the front of the room and was staring at a wall. Igor and Ela were whispering about something and the women of the pack and Hannibal sat talking together in hushed tones.

As Jack spoke with these two men, he was reminded of concerns that he had yet to address. It was about the "quality" of their recruits. These guys weren't only very "different," they just weren't all that bright, as far as Jack was concerned. He didn't mean that in a bad way —it was just a fact that he couldn't ignore. He glanced again at Ivan. Sometimes, he had concerns that their Alpha male of the pack was too caught up in the drama of his own life to notice that his pack was as bedraggled as it was. He made a mental note to talk to Karina and maybe even Ivan about it when things settled down.

When Karina and Babushka came back, Karina's face was pale. She sat down next to Jack and took his hand.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Are you okay?"

She nodded and squeezed his hand, but he had his doubts. She wasn't looking at him. She was watching Babushka, whose own eyes

were on Karina as well.

Finally, Babushka addressed them. “I have asked Ivan, the Alpha male, for his blessing for what I am about to tell you. He was not thrilled by the idea and neither am I. But we were left with no clues in the disappearance of Tatiana and Abram except for a fake name of the woman who commissioned the painting and the presence of a restless spirit in Ivan’s art studio. I’ve meditated on this most of the day today. I know that you all have a fear of Karina’s grandfather.” She didn’t say the name, as she was trying to keep them all calm so that they would hear her words. If she had said “Rasputin,” that’s all they would have heard. “He is here, in this house. He wants to tell us something and I think that something is about Tatiana and the baby.”

“Please tell us you aren’t planning on trying to find a witch who can make him rise from the dead!” Igor said.

“No,” Babushka said. “Not Grigori. There is something about me that only Karina knows. I *am* a witch and I can raise a dead werewolf if I have access to one of their bones.”

There was a collective gasp, and then, whispers through the group. Ivan still hadn’t spoken, but he cleared his throat to get their attention. The pack fell silent and Karina squeezed Jack’s hand harder.

“I could probably figure out what Grigori wanted to tell me if we had more time. But every day that Tatiana and the baby are gone—well, we just have to find them as soon as we can. I’m not going to bring him to life. Even though Karina is probably the only one of you who truly understands this, he was not evil. As the rumors of my death were exaggerated, so were the rumors of his life. I’m digressing, however.” She said, “Forgive an old woman for her reminiscing.”

Karina and Jack looked at each other. They knew that everything Babushka said had a purpose and the rest of the pack likely did as well. Jack was really worried about her. Her hand was trembling, and she kept squeezing his so hard that it actually hurt.

Babushka went on, “I need a medium, one that I know has been on the other side. One that I know understands who and what we are. I’m just going to say this and then you can ask me whatever questions you may have. I’m going to try and bring Lexi back.”

Another gasp ran through the pack.

Karina looked like she felt sick.

Jack said, “Is this what she told you, outside?”

Karina nodded.

He was the first to ask Babushka a question. “Ana, have you done this before?”

“No. This will be my first try. I don’t know if it will work or exactly how it will work. I just can’t think of any better options, can you?”

Jack looked back at Karina. “Are you going to be okay with this?”

Karina nodded again. It was like talking to a zombie.

Natalya spoke up. “Why bring back Lexi? You could bring Vanya back, or my brother. We have lost many loved ones, yet, Lexi is the one you chose. Is it because your granddaughter misses her best friend?”

Igor, ever the troublemaker, said, “That is a fair question.”

Babushka looked at them. “No, it’s because Lexi was my friend. I am the one who has the power to do this, therefore, I am the one who gets to choose. As long as the Alpha male doesn’t object.”

“I don’t,” Ivan said. “Have you all forgotten that my wife and my son, who is less than a month old, have been taken from me? That’s all any of you should be concerned about. Your Alpha female is missing and you want to whine about your petty jealousies. Sometimes, I am so ashamed to be your Alpha.” He turned then and stormed up the stairs.

The rest of them started to rise as well, but Babushka said, “I’m not finished.”

They sat down again and then she said, “I need one of her bones.”

Ela, being a new werewolf, looked shocked by all of this. Karina could see her clutching Igor’s hand. Karina had been there many times with poor Jack as he discovered more of their world.

Ela finally said what she had been thinking. “Are you going to dig up this girl’s body?”

“No,” Karina said quickly. “Her body would be of no use to Babushka now. It’s been too long. Lexi’s murder was unsolved, as far as the police were concerned. They’ll still keep the evidence samples, though.” She looked at Jack. “Right?”

“They should,” he said, but he looked worried.

“What’s up?” Karina said.

“I don’t work in that department anymore. I can’t just saunter in to the crime lab and grab a bone.”

“We don’t expect you to,” Babushka said. “We will go tonight, and get what we need.”

Jack looked at Karina and said, “We?”

“I’m going with Babushka.”

“I’ll go, too,” Peter said.

“And me,” Hannibal said, finally making an effort to help.

“Wait!” Jack said. “I need to talk to you, Karina, alone.”

Karina nodded. Igor hadn’t said anything, but he watched as Karina followed Jack to the kitchen. Before they began talking, she couldn’t help herself, she looked around and said, “This kitchen is so clean, you can actually eat in here.”

Jack didn’t want to, but he laughed. He realized that was probably

Karina's intention, to defuse their stress.

He shook it off. "It would be safer to just dig up the grave than to break into the crime lab storage."

Karina looked at him like he was crazy. "I won't dig up her grave. Her body would be of no use now, anyway."

"I agree," Jack said. "But you're willing to watch Babushka call her spirit back to life. Then how does she live, Karina? Whose body does she use?"

Karina didn't want to answer that question.

When the truth sunk in, he said, "It's too much for my cop brain to process. Hell, it's too much for me as a human. I feel like I'm caught in an old Vincent Price movie. Does Babushka know what kind of trouble she is borrowing here? Do you?"

"I don't like it any more than you do."

Jack continued, "Did you tell your grandmother how you feel about it?"

"No, I couldn't."

Jack said, "I think she's so caught up by this Rasputin angle that she's losing sight of what is even realistic. And Ivan is allowing her to go through with it because he would do anything to find his wife and child."

"I agree with Jack." They both turned to see Igor in the room. He continued, "Now there's a sentence you'll rarely hear me say."

"You're so sneaky," Jack said.

"I prefer stealth," Igor told him. "Karina, *syestra*, please talk your Babushka out of this craziness."

"You're forgetting that your brother, the Alpha, has already given his blessing."

"Ivan is desperate. This is killing him. You know he always has a plan, except this time. He's not thinking clearly, but I will handle him if you will handle your grandmother. She still scares me."

"Then what do we do to find Tatiana and Abram?" Karina said. "This was actually our best bet, and Babushka knew it. That's why she came up with it to begin with. She doesn't do things impulsively, and she doesn't take life lightly."

Jack moved next to her. "None of this is meant to disparage Ana. We all respect her. But perhaps her emotional bond to Grigori and Lexi is too strong for her to act impartially. What if Grigori is using her emotions to manipulate her?"

"You're right," Karina said. She had been appalled at first when Babushka told her, but once she had begun thinking about seeing Lexi again, the thought had started to grow on her as a hopeful excitement. She hadn't fully let herself think about the ramifications of seeing Lexi in another body. A body that they would find in the morgue, and

steal.

"I'll talk to her, to ask her to reconsider this risky, morbid business," she said. "Igor, you talk to Ivan."

Karina started to go back out into the living room when Igor said, "You and I both know there's another way."

Karina stopped. She didn't turn around, but she could feel Jack's eyes on her.

After a few seconds, he said, "Karina?"

She reluctantly turned around. She looked at Jack, and then at Igor.

She hadn't thought about that night for so long, and suddenly, the memories were foremost in her head, as clear as if it all happened yesterday.

"That way is worse, and you know it."

Igor shrugged. "I thought it was all in the interest of finding my sister-in-law and nephew."

"What's going on?" Jack asked. "What other way?" He could see an almost imperceptible shake of her head when she looked at Igor. All this time and she was still keeping things from him.

Jack turned to Igor. "Tell me what other way you mean, as she's obviously not going to trust me enough to spill it."

"Jack!" she protested.

He ignored her. For the first time since Jack knew him, Igor appeared nervous.

"There's a cave in the hills. We found something there, once," Igor said.

"We don't know that it's still there," Karina said. "I haven't been there in years, have you?"

"No," he said. "But I'm sure that it's still there. If it wasn't, we would know." His words made Karina suddenly think of the thing that had been scratching on the windows and walls of the house at night. She shuddered.

Jack said, "What do you mean—*it?* Someone please tell me what you're talking about."

"Chinese werewolves," Karina said, "Several of them."

"I thought we already killed those guys!"

"Apparently, there are more of them. Several more."

"More than several," he said, "And more than a vampire, Karina." He looked at Jack and said, "Another werewolf pack probably helped kidnap Tatiana and the baby."

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Chapter Six

Babushka found Karina, Igor and Jack in the kitchen. Karina and Igor sat at the table looking guilty, and Jack was leaning against the counter looking like a teacher who had just caught two of his students cheating.

"What is it?" she said.

Karina swallowed hard. She looked at Babushka. "I don't think we should do it. I'm sorry, but we would be borrowing more trouble by bringing Lexi's spirit back from wherever she has gone to rest and forcing her to use another body to live—and then getting her to become a medium to communicate with Grigori. It just seems—"

"Crazy?" Babushka interrupted. It wasn't as if she herself hadn't thought of it that way. She knew that wanting to see and communicate with the love of her life again had much to do with her decision.

"Yes," Karina said, looking at Igor and Jack for backup.

Jack finally spoke. Using the soft tone that he reserved for Babushka, he said, "Ana, we know that you only want to help, but you said yourself that you've never done this before. We don't even know if it will work, right?"

She gave him a nod and he went on. "If it went wrong somehow, we'd just have yet another problem to deal with."

"Since you feel that strongly about it, I won't do it," Babushka promised.

Karina sighed in relief and in sadness. There was something in Babushka's eyes that Karina didn't recognize. She thought maybe it was disappointment that they didn't trust her plan and she felt bad. She stood and went to her grandmother. "Babushka, you know we trust you, right? We depend on you. We're just afraid, and that tiny little thought in the back of our heads just won't go away. It says, 'What if Lexi's like one of the walking dead?' I haven't once seen her spirit since she's been gone, have you?"

Babushka shook her head.

"If she was still here, close by, don't you think one of us would have? I think that means she has already crossed over, and she's at peace. I don't want to call her back and destroy that peace for her. Not to mention the risk of causing more trouble here."

Babushka looked at the men and they nodded. She sighed. "I wanted to help. But I was being selfish. I wanted to bring Lexi back because I hoped she could help find Tatiana and Abram. But it also had a lot to do with Grigori. I thought Lexi could help me communicate with him. I really do believe his spirit needs to tell us something. The fact that he's been here, in this house, is what makes

me believe that it's something about Tatiana and the boy that caused the stir about the paintings."

"Babushka," Jack said, "do you think Grigori is the one putting the thoughts in your head about bringing people back?"

"What do you mean?" Karina asked.

"If everything I've read about him is even remotely true, he was an egoist. If he can get Ana to bring someone back who can communicate with him, then he can tell you where to find his body, and how to bring him back. What if helping us is not his goal? What if he has an ulterior motive that he wants to live again and rise in power in a new pack, or take over our little pack of misfits and whip it into shape?"

Babushka didn't look like she appreciated Jack's analysis of Grigori, but she didn't dispute it either.

Jack continued, "Karina and Igor apparently have a secret. One that they think can help, although I am almost as skeptical about their idea as I am of the one involving Lexi and Grigori."

Babushka looked first at Karina and then at Igor. "What secret?"

Igor, like the coward he was around Babushka, didn't speak. He looked at Karina instead.

Jack saw her eyes flash dark anger at him and then she turned to her grandmother and said, "Sit down, please, Babushka."

The old woman did as Karina asked.

Karina said, "When I was a teenager before that night when I killed that man, we were running in the hills during the day in our werewolf forms." Babushka gave her a look like when this was over, Karina was going to be grounded for life, but she didn't say anything so Karina went on. "We found a cave. I'm not sure where the others were. We had gotten separated during our run, and when we came upon the cave, it was just Igor and me."

She looked at Igor again, but he looked no more willing to interject now than he had been before. "We heard something inside, a scratching or shuffling noise and we were hungry. We thought maybe it was a rabbit. We were hoping, anyway. We couldn't smell it, but we did smell something. It was a new smell. Something we hadn't smelled before and we couldn't figure out what it was. We were curious. We got ready to fight, just in case, as we went inside to look. I followed behind Igor and we had only taken a few steps in when we heard this rustling noise, like a bird."

"But it wasn't a bird," Igor said at last. "We looked up and the top of the cave was covered with bats. Most of them were hanging upside down, asleep. There was one that wasn't like the others, though. He was staring at us with these horrible eyes. They were red, like blood, and I couldn't stop looking at them."

“We knew at once what he was, although we had never seen one. In the Old Country, we had heard all of the stories about vampires. We started backing out, and Igor put himself between me and the bat that stared at us with his red eyes. I averted mine, but Igor stared back,” Karina said.

Babushka shuddered. “Go on.”

Igor said, “In my defense, I had never seen a real bat before, nor had I seen anything with red eyes. Even we don’t have red eyes. But that’s because we’re alive and part human, I guess. Anyway, it was like the vampire’s eyes were magnets. I couldn’t turn away.”

Karina waited for him to stop his babble, and then she went on. “By the time we got back to the entrance of the cave, Igor fell over. I thought he was sick, I was scared. I grabbed his fur and pulled on him, until I had gotten him all the way out. Once we were outside, in the sun, I changed back to my human form, hoping I could help him. But, by that time he just woke up on his own.”

“That thing hypnotized me or something,” Igor said. “It only looked directly at me for a few minutes and Karina said I was only out for seconds, but during that time I saw crazy things in my head. I saw my parents, and my grandparents. And then, I saw the future, although I didn’t know it then. I saw Ivan as the Alpha. I saw Lexi and Vanya in their coffins, and I saw Grigori Rasputin. Until now, I would never have admitted that. For a few seconds, I had his evil in my head. And in my heart. It was like I was overtaken by a power, an evil power.”

Babushka put a hand to her throat.

Igor looked at Babushka. “I’m sorry. It was like in those few seconds I had watched a movie of my entire life but it was on fast forward, so I only saw everything as it flashed by me. I had almost forgotten it until now. Suddenly, I remember it all.”

“He was just a bat.”

“No, Babushka. He was not just a bat. That evil one. He was a vampire in his bat form, at least that’s what we believe. It was still daylight, so once Igor recovered a bit, we started pushing rocks in front of the cave. We thought we could keep them in,” Karina told her. “We didn’t know what we were doing. We were young and we didn’t think ahead. We just knew they were evil and we didn’t want them to come out and do what vampires do.”

“Did it work?” Jack asked. “Trapping them in the cave?”

Igor and Karina looked at each other.

Igor said, “No, the next time we ran at night, the rocks were moved and the cave was empty.”

With a raised eyebrow, Jack said, “You went back in and checked?”

“We were teenage werewolves, Jack, and we had very little to fear,” Igor told him. “We didn’t know any better.”

Babushka wasn’t saying anything. Karina still felt like that teenage werewolf sometimes when her grandmother looked at her disapprovingly as more things about her wild teen years surfaced.

Then she looked at Jack and she could tell that he was angry, too. He probably felt left out again. She couldn’t help it that she had had adventures with Igor and Ivan. They were a part of her life history and her heart. It was exhausting to try to make sure that Jack didn’t get jealous of her history with the brothers.

Much of his angst was due to jealousy that the others had known her so much longer, and knew everything about her. Karina couldn’t change that fact. Jack would just have to come to realize that although that was true, he knew her heart and he was her present and future.

“Babushka, that thing…” Karina hesitated to say *vampire* almost as much as her friends did Rasputin, but she forced herself to ask, “That vampire, he sees things that we can’t, right? He read Igor’s mind and pulled out his thoughts. Maybe he’s the one who can help us.”

Thinking again about the marks, she wondered if maybe he was the problem and not the cure. She didn’t know what it would want with Tatiana and Abram, though. She was afraid to think of what a vampire would want with an Alpha female werewolf and her young son.

She glanced at Jack. He was looking at her, but she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. His eyes were dark, almost black. She knew it was a lot for him to process.

“Vampires are unpredictable,” Babushka said. “You all have to remember that they are no longer mostly human like us. Their instincts are always completely selfish.” She looked at Jack and said, “You want to see an egoist? You’ve never met one until you’ve met a vampire.”

“So, do you think we should leave that alone as well?” Igor asked.

“Where is our Alpha? I think that the ultimate decision needs to be his, don’t you all?” Karina said.

“You’d assume that,” Jack said. “But his thoughts have not exactly been clear lately. I don’t know about everyone else, but I fear that Ivan’s emotions will take over and cause him to make a decision that could harm us all.”

“Jack, speaking of secrets, maybe now is a good time to tell Babushka yours,” Karina said.

Jack gave her a nod and told Babushka, “I’ve been having dreams, or at least that’s what I thought they were at first. They’ve become more like visions now. I knew that something bad was going to

happen to Tatiana and the baby."

"Then why didn't you warn us?" It was Ivan, standing in the doorway. "And why are you all sneaking around in here, leaving your Alpha and the rest of the pack out of this conversation?"

Igor and Karina looked at him guilt on their faces. Babushka had just defended him so her conscience was right. Jack seemed to want to spar, however, as he said, "The rest of the pack are simple-minded fools and our Alpha is so emotionally wounded that he seems barely awake."

Ivan crossed the distance between them and put his face only inches in front of Jack's. "Whatever you may believe about me or my pack, the fact remains that I am their leader. And if you want to continue to be part of this pack, you need to accept that I am your leader as well. If not, you're welcome to join another pack and fight for Alpha rights there."

Karina was holding her breath. Igor looked amused. Babushka looked about to scold them both.

Jack however, showing the good sense that Karina knew he had when he said, "I apologize, Ivan. The stress of all of this has gotten to me as well. I know you are hurting and I can't even imagine your pain. I just want to help. I apologize if I overstepped my position here."

Ivan continued his icy stare, but he took a step back. After a few seconds, he looked at Babushka and said, "What happened to our plan?"

Babushka explained the concerns of the others to him. She even told him what Jack had said about it possibly being a way for Grigori to manipulate her.

Ivan looked like he was processing that when she looked at Igor and Karina and said, "The two of you can tell him the rest."

Karina looked at Igor. "This is all you. Jack, would you like to step outside with me?"

"Okay," Jack said. He looked back at Ivan. "You'll let us know what you decide?"

Ivan nodded, but Karina could tell that Jack was hesitant to leave without knowing what the plan was.

"I'll be in the art studio," Babushka said. Undoubtedly, she would be in there still trying to communicate with Grigori. *Her lost love.*

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Chapter Seven

Karina and Jack walked out to the back yard of the pack house. Jack had never been there. He looked around at the dead grass and overgrown weeds. “Maybe Babushka needs to encourage some yard work next.”

Karina nodded. She walked over to a picnic table set up under a tree. “Do you want to sit?”

Jack looked at the rotted wood on the table. “I don’t think it would support me.” Instead, he sat down on one of the two cement steps that led out of the house. Karina sat next to him. She sighed heavily.

“Are you upset with me?” he asked.

“No, but I could tell you were upset with me when Igor brought up the cave incident.”

“It just seems like there’s so much I still don’t know about you. I keep feeling like I am out of the loop.”

“Let me ask you this, Jack. If you and I went to Minnesota and you introduced me to your friends and family, wouldn’t they know things about you that I didn’t?”

“Yeah.”

“It stands to reason that people who have known you your entire life will know more about you than people you’ve only known for, say a year. I tell you what’s important, sometimes, but not until it comes up. But again, I can’t possibly tell you everything that’s ever happened to me in my entire life in one sitting. You need to stop taking every little new piece of information about me as a personal affront. Besides, Igor did mention vampires once before—remember, up on the hill that night we fought Dmitri?”

She expected him to be mad at her, but instead, he was nodding. “I thought he was kidding. He has such an odd sense of humor, sometimes it’s hard to tell. What you’re saying makes sense, and I’m sorry. I will try. I love you so much.”

She smiled. “I love you, too. Before we get gooey here, though, there’s one more thing I’d like to talk about.”

“Okay.”

“What’s going on with you and Ivan, and what was with you slamming the pack like that?”

“I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that, but I was in there talking to these guys tonight and first of all, have you ever really had a conversation with them? They are—I don’t even know how to put it nicely. They’re idiots. And that is not a slam to any people who are born mentally deficient because they truly cannot help it. What is wrong with the Danilov werewolves that they are so out of it?”

"You noticed?"

"Of course I did!"

"They're Omegas, Jack," Karina said, as if that explained everything.

"Karina, in the grand pecking order of things, that's what you and I are, too. We're not idiots, though."

"I don't think of us as Omegas," she said.

Jack laughed. "Neither do I. But it's because of the way the rest of them act. I don't want to be associated with that. I think that Ivan taking care of everything for them has just made them stupid and lazy, as if they can't think for themselves."

"Good observation."

"But it's horrible! If we had really needed them to fight Dmitri's war, they would have all been dead within minutes."

"Jack!" she said. "They fought as well as each was able to—some of them fought for us that night."

"I'm sorry, Karina, but does it make Ivan feel more secure to know that he is smarter than everyone else in his pack? He designed it this way, with the intention of you becoming his Alpha. He didn't want anyone challenging his authority and if they're too dumb to do that, even to ask intelligent questions that might spare their lives or make their lives better. They are just zombie-like followers. That's it, these Omegas are like zombie werewolves."

Karina was looking around making sure no one was listening. "Jack, you shouldn't talk like that." She understood what he was saying, but he shouldn't be saying it here. He still failed to realize what kind of advantage that Ivan had over him.

Jack leaned in and whispered in her ear, "I will see this through until Tatiana and Abram are found, but beyond that, if Ivan wants my respect, he'll need to earn it. He's taking advantage of the mentally deficient ones of the pack. They are puppets to him and fail to have the capacity to even make simple decisions like finding employment."

Karina felt that sick feeling in her stomach again. This sort of thing was why she had left the pack in the first place. The constant fighting and continual drama were exactly what she had walked away from. Now, here was the man she loved, the one she had brought into the pack, ready to overthrow the order of things in the name of improvement. It was too much for her sometimes. Instead of addressing that thought, she said, "Let's go back inside and see what they've decided."

They went back into the kitchen. It was empty, so they went into the living room. Ela was there and they could hear something going on in the art studio, but they didn't see any of the others.

"Ela, where is everyone?" Karina asked her, afraid that she already

knew the answer.

"Your Babushka is still in the studio. I think she is talking to a ghost." Ela wrinkled her nose, new-werewolf style.

"What about the rest of the pack?" Jack said.

"They went to find a vampire. This place is insane, isn't it? The last place I stayed where people believed in ghosts and vampires and werewolves was a locked facility with therapists. And anti-psychotic drugs."

Jack looked at Karina as if to say, *See, she proves my point.*

"Where did they go, Ela?"

"To the caves," she said. "Where Igor saw the bat."

"Damn them!" Jack said. "Come on!"

Karina followed him out the door, but when they got to the car, she said, "Jack, the reason they left Ela, and didn't tell us is because neither of you will be able to change into a werewolf at will because you are made werewolves, not born werewolves. These creatures are more dangerous than any werewolf that you've ever met, if what I've heard about them my entire life is true."

"I'm not staying here," he said, "no matter how badly Ivan wants me to be left out of the fight."

Karina rolled her eyes and got in the car. *Alpha drama!*

"Where to?" he said.

"To the bat cave," she said. "I've always wanted to say that!"

He laughed. "Duh. Where is it?"

"It's right near the cave they used in *Batman* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and lots of other TV shows."

"Wow, the irony."

"Tell me about it."

Jack was still looking at her blankly. After all of his years in L.A., he really was a transplant. "Point me in the right direction."

"Take Canyon Drive up north toward Griffith Park."

As he drove, they both sat quietly, wondering what they were going to walk into. Karina was more worried for Jack than she was herself. It seemed like suddenly he had something to prove, and she was afraid he was going to end up hurt or worse.

She took out her phone and pulled up Google. She looked for information about the caves. She couldn't remember which one they had seen the bats in. None of the listings said anything about bats, and when she typed in vampire bats, she found out that they didn't even live in California. *But then again,* she thought, *If I typed in werewolf, it would probably say the same thing.*

"Where to now?" he asked her when they reached the gates to the park.

"Go through the gates and park in the gravel lot."

Jack pulled in next to the white van that the werewolf pack used. It was the only other car in the lot.

"Now, we hike," Karina told him.

Neither of them were dressed for hiking, and about an eighth of a mile up the trail, Karina really wanted to change to her wolf form. She looked sideways at Jack, and she knew it would be the worst thing she could do for his mood right now, so she tabled the idea.

They walked until they reached the original bat cave. She told Jack, and then she stood still for a minute, calling upon her senses to remember every detail of what had happened there. It had been a long time ago, and her senses weren't as honed in her human form as they were in her wolf one. She closed her eyes, trying to picture that night.

It had been odd that she and Igor had ended up there together. Back then, she'd avoid him like the plague if she could. Igor was such an arrogant ass. But that night, as they were running through the big cave, Ivan had seen something. Later, he said it was just a "dark shape" against the cave wall. It hadn't smelled human, so he hadn't been sure what it was. He had started howling and urging them all out of the cave. The others had run after him, and Karina had started to as well, when she realized that Igor hadn't come back out. That's why they were there together—she had gone back in to get him. To save him.

She had walked the length of the cave and when she didn't see him, she continued to walk through. That night she had come out the other side, she remembered the fantastic view of the Hollywood sign. She had found him there and barked at him to come with her.

However, he'd smelled something when the wind came up, down the other side of the hill.

Her urgings didn't do anything to convince him, so instead of leaving him there and running after the others, she had followed him.

When she opened her eyes, Jack was standing quietly, watching her think.

"I remember now. This way." Karina walked inside of the big cave as Jack followed her. They walked through in the dark, thankful that neither of them needed a flashlight to see. The tunnel was short and Karina was in front of Jack, sniffing the air, trying to get the scent of the pack. She smelled something, but it wasn't werewolves.

"What is that smell?" Jack asked her.

"Vampires," she said. "They are so foul-smelling, the poor things."

Jack wrinkled his nose in agreement. "I will never eat mushrooms on anything again."

When they came out to the other side, she led him around the bend toward the Hollywood sign and then she stopped again. She closed her eyes and pictured it back then. She had followed Igor down

the side of the mountain. Both of them had that terrible new scent in their nose now. They had climbed down to a narrow ridge that wound around the hill. The cave was there, she remembered now. She opened her eyes and pulled off her shoes.

Looking at Jack, she said, “I’m sorry. I remember it now and it’s not accessible on foot, not human feet anyway. That side of the hill is steep, and the ridge is too narrow.”

Jack didn’t say anything, he only nodded and watched her undress. She handed him her clothes and in seconds, she transformed into the silky white werewolf that captivated him and enthralled him.

Jack stood there looking at her, once again amazed by her beauty. He was having weird twitches and tingling sensations. He knew it meant he wanted to change, but he usually only got the sensations during the full moon. He stood there and watched Karina, fantasizing that someday he would be able to change at will. He wished it could be right now. He really wanted to go with her. He concentrated hard, but all that happened was that he gave himself a headache. Karina the wolf came over and rubbed her soft fur against his leg.

“Go get ‘em, girl,” Jack told her with a smile and a pat on her head. She smiled back, a big toothy canine grin, and then, flicking him once with her big fluffy tail, she took off down the side of the hill.

As she climbed down, she picked up the smell of the others, and something else. It must be the vampires, as they smelled like nothing else. She had to walk a narrow path along a ridge for about a quarter of a mile before she found it. The smell of werewolf was strong, and what she now assumed was a vampire smell was practically overwhelming. She poked her head into the cave. The others weren’t in sight, and neither were the bats. She didn’t sense any danger, and she could smell her pack, so she went inside. She took about three steps in before she let out a quick yelp. Within seconds, she got six yelps back.

She followed the sound through the cramped space until it suddenly opened up into one gigantic cavern. She had to stop and get her bearings for a moment. She hadn’t been expecting this. It was beautiful, and apparently, since it just looked like a tiny little hole on the side of a cave inaccessible to ordinary humans without some serious climbing gear, it was basically isolated. The pink and red rocks that made up the high ceiling were covered with two to three feet long crystalline "vines." The ground was smooth dirt that almost looked like it had been professionally packed down, and there were smaller openings in the rock around the circular cavern that Karina now stood in. As she gazed in awe of her surroundings, a silver head suddenly poked itself through one of the openings.

It was Ivan. She ran over to him, and he nuzzled her, in a way that

made her glad that Jack wasn't here to see them. Then Ivan morphed back into his human form and asked Karina to do the same. She wasn't as comfortable doing it in front of him as she used to be. She knew it was silly, but being naked in front of her ex-boyfriend felt a bit disloyal.

She looked around for the others and Ivan said, "They're inside another cavern. All of these holes lead to tunnels and caverns. I think most of them are manmade. Are you going to change so we can talk?"

Karina did, and she sat in the dirt so that she could use her arms and hands to cover most of her body.

Ivan had no such modesty as he told her about their exploration of this place and how amazing it was.

"I think this is their vampire den, Karina."

"It smells like it." She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"They stink, don't they?"

She nodded. "Have you seen any?"

"No, but it has to be what? Ten or eleven o'clock by now. I'm sure they're out living the night life. Stinking up the city, sucking blood. I think they come here to sleep and hide out during the day."

"So, what now?" she asked.

"We come back when they're home," he told her. There was a sudden new resolve in his eyes.

***

An hour later, Karina and the others found Jack where she had left him. She changed back to her two-legged form and began putting on her clothes that Jack had held for her.

As she was dressing, he asked, "Did you find anything?"

"I think we found their vampire den," she said, then wrinkling her nose in remembrance of the stench. "I'm not sure if that's what they call it. I think they probably just go with bat cave. Anyhow, I'll tell you more about it when we get to the car."

The others stayed in their wolf forms until they got to the bottom of the hill. As Igor had recently found out, people in Hollywood were less shocked to see a wolf roaming around than they were naked men.

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Chapter Eight

Karina described the cave and the caverns to Jack on the way home. She could tell that he was sad that he couldn't have seen it because he was a made werewolf and not able to change at will like a born werewolf, except during eclipse weeks.

When they got back to her apartment, she said, "Are you staying with me tonight?"

He grinned. "If you're planning on washing off that vampire stench first."

Karina laughed. "Maybe you could help me shower. I think maybe it got into places I can't reach."

She didn't have to tell him twice. Jack jumped out of the car and ran around to open her door. Taking her hands and pulling her out and to her feet, he looked into her eyes. "I'm sorry I'm such a jealous ass sometimes."

"It's okay, I'm sorry I stink like vampire from being in the bat cave. It was full of guano." She made a face.

He kissed her then, raising her up on her toes, and leaving her breathless. He put his arm around her then and they walked up to her apartment. As she slipped the key in the apartment door, she said, "I'm going to check in with Babushka to make sure she got home okay. And then, we're turning off our phones and taking a bubble bath."

"Me, too?" he said. "I don't stink."

"You will, after I put my stinky hands all over you."

He grinned again. "Call Babushka, tell her I love her, and I'll meet you naked in the bathroom." He thought about how that sentence had come out then and said, "Wait, just tell her I love her. The rest of that sentence was for you."

Karina smiled and slapped him on the shoulder when he turned around. "I've seen the way you look at my grandma," she said with a laugh.

"Now, who's jealous?" he teased.

When Jack was gone down the hall, she called her grandmother, who answered right away.

"Hi, Babushka. Are you home safe?"

"Yes, *malyutka*. Are you?"

"Yes. Jack's here with me. Hey, I hope we're okay. You're not mad at me about earlier?"

"We will always be okay. I'm not always right. When you live hundreds of years, you have to be wrong at least twice. It's a rule."

"How did it go in the studio?"

"Interesting," Babushka said, "but it's late. Let's have lunch and

talk tomorrow. I want to hear about your night as well."

"Okay, Babushka. I love you to the full moon."

"I love you more," Babushka said.

By the time Karina got to the bathroom, Jack had not only drawn the bath and filled it with bubbles, but he'd already stripped down and gotten in. She took off her clothes, slowly. He'd just watched her do this a couple of hours ago but somehow, as the hot bathwater filled the room with steam, it was a lot sexier. She took her time and maddeningly stood just out of reach of him.

"Karina. You're so beautiful."

Once all of her clothes were on the floor, she leaned down and gave him a kiss. It was a full wet mouth with tongues entwined, blow-your-mind kind of kiss.

Jack moaned, "Are you going to get in, or are you trying to make me explode?"

She smiled and stepped over the side of the tub. He helped her sit down between his legs, facing away from him. She rested her head on his chest and he could smell the sweet citrus fragrance of her hair. They just sat there like that, soaking for a really long time.

Jack sighed, contentedly. When she was this close to him with nothing between their hearts but skin, Jack could hardly make himself have a rational thought, and he loved it. She brought him out of his pleasure-induced coma by saying, "I thought you were going to wash my back."

Jack picked up the sea sponge off the side of the tub and poured her body wash into it. He began washing her back, and then her arms, and then her legs, moving the sponge in short, slow, concentric circles that were so erotic that it nearly drove her mad with desire. She turned around to face him and planted another deep kiss on his lips. This one lasted so long that they both had trouble catching their breath when they came up for air.

"You're amazing, Jack," she told him.

"Only when I'm with you," he said. They made love then, and the warm water intensified the sexual energy. Jack finally needed to have all of her. He stepped out of the tub and pulled her out with him. He took a towel and dried her off as erotically as he had washed her. Then he picked her up and carried her to the bed. That night, they fell asleep in each other's arms with nary a thought about dead dogs, prostitute killers, vampires or even werewolves.

***

Jack was gone when Karina woke up the next morning. He had left a note that read: *It just gets better and better. Have a great day! -J-*

A warm happiness spread through her.

Karina reached for her phone. When she looked at it, she realized she had never turned it back on last night. She turned it on and went into the bathroom. By the time she came out, it was alerting her that she had four new text messages, and three new voicemails. Karina sighed and read the messages first.

Jack—*In case you forgot—I love you :-)*

Ivan—*headed back out to the vampire den—I'll call you later.*

Igor—*Hi.*

Karina shook her head at that one. He was so weird.

Babushka—*Meet for lunch at Anita's? Noon?*

It was funny to Karina that her hundred-year-old grandmother had learned how to text.

She texted Jack back first to tell him that she loved him, too. Then to Ivan, she texted for him to be safe and not forget to call her. To Igor, she texted back Hi and a smiley face emoticon. Finally, to Babushka, she texted: *You're on*.

Then she listened to the voicemails. One of them was from Viktor Glazkov. He said that he had a new investigation job for her, but didn't give any details. She was intrigued and would call him back when she got to the office.

The second was from Babushka, just confirming their lunch plans.

The third call was from the president of the homeowners' association, Hank McAlpine, with whom she had a meeting scheduled on Friday. He had arrived back early and had some things to do in town later. He wondered if he could meet her at her office today. She called him right back.

"Hi, Mr. McAlpine, it's Karina Nosova."

"Yes, Miss Nosova. I was wondering if I could just come by your office this afternoon. I came back into town a day early, but tomorrow is going to be a really busy day."

"Yes, sir, absolutely. I was wondering if you might be able to show me some photographs."

"Of one of the units?"

"Yes, I was hoping to see the ones of unit 602 after the last tenant moved about, before the repairs."

"Hmm, I suppose that since we owned it at the time and all of his personal belongings had been removed, there shouldn't be a confidentiality issue with it. I'm assuming this person is who you're investigating?"

"Yes, sir, he is."

"Well, I will bring the photos and ask you to look at them as a property we own and are now renting out, without mention of the prior owner's name. Is that fair? That you see it as a prospective

renter?"

"Perfectly fair," she told him. "What time should I expect you?"

"I'll see you about two at your office, if that's okay?"

"Perfect again, see you then," she said. It was going to be a busy, and hopefully, a productive, day.

***

When Jack had awakened that morning, he had two messages. One was from his cop partner who had watched their suspect at night. The guy hadn't come home all night. Neither the Lamborghini nor the red BMW were there. Jack drove by the parking garage near Wilshire Boulevard. The Lamborghini with the listening device in it was still there. He drove to each level and up and down each aisle, but the red BMW was not there.

The second message was from his boss at the D.A.'s office. For this case, he was working with a female ADA named Sandra Scott. She wasn't happy that he had lost the tail on Justin Browning. She had been in court the day before and he'd not been able to reach her. He had left a message, and then let his partner know before leaving for the day. She told him to find her as soon as he got in. He wasn't really looking forward to getting his ass chewed out today, but it was all part of the job.

When he got to the office, he went straightaway to look for Sandra. Her receptionist came around the corner in time to see him knock on her door. "She's not in there, Jack."

"Hey, Mary! Where is she?"

"They found another body, out in West Hollywood Park."

"Oh, geez, no!" he said, feeling instantly sick to his stomach.

"I know, it's awful. She wanted me to send you out there when you got here. She said to go in on the Santa Monica Boulevard side and they'll direct you."

"Okay, Mary. Thanks."

Jack left the building, wishing that he had gotten his ass chewed out instead. He hated like hell that another poor girl was dead, and he hoped like hell that it wasn't his fault because he had let the guy get away.

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Chapter Nine

As Karina was walking into her office, her phone began ringing. She looked at the phone display, it was Viktor Glazkov again. He was so anxious to talk to her, he couldn't even wait for her to return his call.

She put the phone to her ear as she juggled her bag and put the key in the door. "Hi, Viktor." She said, "I'm just getting in the door, give me one minute, okay?"

"Sure, Karina, sorry," he said.

She finished making her way into the office. She turned her sign around and pushed the "brew" button on the coffee pot. She was super glad she had prepared it before she left last night. Dropping her bag on her desk and plopping her butt in the chair, she said, "Okay, I'm in. I'm sorry, Viktor. It's been a busy morning."

"It's okay, Karina. I apologize for bothering you so early. I have to go out of town for a few days and I'm leaving tomorrow. I was hoping to talk to you before then if you have any time."

Karina's only other paid case right now was Uri's, and her only appointment was with Hank McAlpine that afternoon. She pushed the kidnapping to the back of her mind. She still needed to make a living. "Do you want to come in around three this afternoon?"

"Today at three would be great, thank you, Karina."

After she hung up, she looked at the clock. It was just after nine. She thought about calling Ivan or Igor and finding out what was going on with the vampires. It was probably too soon, so she would give them another hour or so, and if they didn't call her, then she would call them.

She decided to make a visit to "Nick the Terrible" before meeting Babushka for lunch. She filled her travel mug almost to the top with coffee, three sugars and two creams and set off for Sherman Oaks. The seven-and-a-half mile drive took her over thirty minutes, and when she got there, Nick was either not there or not answering the door. It was the one thing she really didn't like about her job. If she called first, it gave them a chance to take off on her before she got there, but if she fought the L.A. traffic to get wherever she was going, nine times out of ten they wouldn't be home.

Karina looked at her watch. She was supposed to meet Babushka at Anita's near Olivera Street at noon. She was wondering if she had time to swing by Studio City and see this guy at work. She wasn't even sure yet what she was going to say, she just wanted to see him in person and get a read on the guy. She got back into her car and realized that she had a missed call from Igor. He hadn't left a message. She called him back and he answered right away.

"Hi, Karina," he said.

"Hey, what's happening with the—you know? *Them*."

"The vampires?" he whispered. "The big bad werewolf is not afraid of a little old vampire in bat form, is she?"

"Hush, Igor, and tell me what's going on, and how is Ivan?"

"Well, first of all, my brother seems in better spirits this morning. I think having some kind of direction to start in at least raised his hopes a bit. Second of all, we found hundreds of sleeping bats in the cave this morning. They don't wake up happy, either. One of the little bastards bit me on the back and I think he got a liter of my blood before good old Hannibal took a bite out of him. That thing exploded blood when Hannibal bit it."

"Thank you so much for that lovely description," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. No wings yet."

"Don't even joke about that. I assume werewolves are immune."

"You're a werewolf. We don't get squeamish about blood and vampires."

"I'm not squeamish. I'm just anxious to hear what happened. Is everyone okay? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just mostly pissed off that I got a bat bite. They hurt like heck. We called Babushka, and she's on her way over with her magic medicine bag. Everyone will live."

"So, did you talk to them?"

Igor laughed. "No, *syestra*. Bats don't talk."

"Oh, my God, Igor. I am going to drive over there and bite you myself!"

"Mmm, that can be arranged. I'll have to send my girlfriend on an errand, though."

"For shame! I'm like a sister to you!"

Igor laughed again. "You wish."

"Sheesh. Get your hands out of your pants and tell me about the vampires."

He laughed. "They were pretending to be nothing but regular dumb animal bats. We got one, though."

"You took one out of the cave?"

"Yep, my dear brother, the Alpha, carried the nasty little varmint in his teeth all the way down the hill. It was funny to watch the tourists run away as this big-ass silver wolf came running down the mountain with a bat in his teeth. The rest of us were all bloody and torn up. We might make the ten o'clock news. Bats versus wolves in Griffith Park."

"Don't even joke about going public with this." Karina shook her head. Igor apparently had no sense of what it would be like if the

public discovered who and what they were. “So, where is the bat now?”

“He’s in a cage in our living room.”

“Wow,” she said. “He’s going to stink up the place just after the pack cleaned it all up.”

“Yeah, them’s the breaks,” Igor said.

“You said that Babushka is on her way?”

“Yes, we needed a bit of TLC. Ivan is specifically asking for her. I think she calms him down with that smell-o-logy science.”

“Aromatherapy?”

“That’s it. Plus, the ghost in the studio is really freaking out today. I was hoping she could calm him down, too, so I could take a nap. He’s loud and Ivan needs his art studio back so he can work. He is so inhuman to live with if he can’t paint pictures. But we are totally full up on supernaturals at the den.”

Karina understood how Jack felt now. “Okay, Igor. I’ll call Babushka. We’re supposed to have lunch out somewhere, but I’ll just meet her over there.”

“Cool,” he said.

Karina called Babushka next. “I hear you’re headed to the den.”

“Yes, I’m sure you heard the rest.”

Now, she could picture Babushka rolling her eyes. She hoped Igor hadn’t been quite as descriptive with her.

“Yes, and he also says that Grigori is quite restless today.”

In Russian, Babushka said, “Crazy life.”

Karina had to agree. She told her she was on her way to Century City and would stop by the den afterward.

“Do you want me to bring something for lunch?” Karina offered.

“Yes, please. If you’ll bring me one of those roast chickens from Von’s, I would love you forever.”

“Sure, Babushka. That sounds good.”

“Bring two, dear,” she told her before she hung up.

Karina tried to get ahold of Jack before she got to Century City, but he wasn’t answering. He was probably busy with work. She just left a voicemail: “Hey, I have news about the vampire bats. Call me when you have time. Love you.”

***

Jack had a strong stomach. He had to. After twenty years of law enforcement and a year of being involved with a werewolf and her pack, his stomach should have been cast iron. But as he stood there now and looked down on the corpse of the girl partially hidden in the brush, he felt his belly lurch. He had to do what he did as a rookie,

and put Vicks VapoRub inside of his nostrils.

"The medical examiner says the time of death is not going to be easy to ascertain, due to the removal of her organs." The son of a bitch had not only taken her blood, but this time, he had also removed all of her vital organs. It was a crude job, one that proved to them that what he was not—a surgeon.

"I was afraid—" he started.

Sandra put her hand on his shoulder. "Jack. He got this girl way before you lost him yesterday. She's been dead longer than that."

Jack nodded. He had a lump in his throat now and didn't trust himself to speak. "How old do you think she is?" he asked her as they watched the M.E. and the crime scene techs doing their thing.

Sandra shrugged, "I don't know. I'd say she's fifteen or sixteen."

"Somebody's baby girl. Sickening."

Sandra said, "We have to nail this son of a bitch."

"More than that."

"Don't get emotional about this case. You'll just make yourself crazy," Sandra advised.

After the crime scene was cleaned up and the body taken away, Jack went to the studio where Justin Browning worked. It was a large building, and Justin's office was on the thirty-third floor. Jack walked up to the reception desk and said, "Jack Hardy, here to see Mr. Browning."

"Is he expecting you, sir?" the receptionist asked.

"No, but I think he'll see me."

She looked doubtful, but she pushed a button and a few seconds later, she said, "Mr. Browning, I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. There's a Jack Hardy here to see you. He says that you'll want to see him."

He didn't wait to hear the rest of the conversation. He knew what he wanted to know now: Browning was here.

Jack wasn't allowed to speak to him without his attorney present, so the anticipated meeting was a bust. As he walked back to his car to strike up his stakeout, he felt another strange tingling sensation like he'd had the night before, and his hands and feet suddenly felt like they were pulsating. He stopped walking for a minute and looked down at his hands. They were swollen, and there was a patch of hair on the back of each one that was never there before.

Interesting, Jack thought. He couldn't wait to get home and talk to Karina about it.

Once he got back in his car, he realized that he had a voicemail message from her. He listened to it and then called her back right away.

Now, he got *her* voicemail. He waited for the beep and said, "I've got something interesting to tell you. Tag, you're it."

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Chapter Ten

Karina went into the office where Nate the Terrible worked. She went to the desk in the lobby, and suddenly, she couldn't remember his last name. She had Nate the Terrible on her mind lately every time she thought about him. She wracked her brain. Klein! That was it… *Nate Klein*. She smiled sweetly at the older lady behind the desk and lied, "Hi, my name is Katrina North. I have an interview scheduled with Mr. Klein."

The receptionist looked at her computer screen, struck a few keys and then said, "I don't see anything here Miss North. Mr. Klein's not in today."

"Oh, shoot! I wonder if I got the day wrong."

"Maybe that's it," the receptionist said. "He's out on a shoot until the end of next week, though."

"Oh, is that the one they're doing about the caves?" she asked.

"No. Miss, are you sure you have the right office?"

"This is where Nick Klein, the cameraman who does great documentaries?"

"Our Nick Klein is a cameraman. He doesn't do documentaries, though."

"I guess maybe I do have the wrong Nick Klein. What does your Nick do?"

"He's an adult film maker," the receptionist told her in a whispery voice.

Karina thanked her and left.

When she got to her car, she looked him up again online. His LinkedIn account said that he was a cinematographer and it listed a few local documentaries that he'd worked on. She had gotten his business address from there, and that was also what the court papers had said that he did for a living, so she hadn't looked any further. She looked up his IMDB account. Bingo. It also listed the documentaries, but then went on to list two recent releases: *The Maid's Big Daddy* and *Mama Likes Leather*. That might explain a lot. She looked at the time. It was after eleven-thirty. She needed to get to Von's and pick up Babushka's rotisserie chickens.

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Karina got to the den around twelve thirty. She had bought five chickens, as she wasn't about to walk into a wolves' den with roasted chicken and not offer any to share. It was a good way to get your arm chewed off. She knocked, but no one answered. She had to sit the boxes of chicken down in order to open the door.

When she stuck her head in the door, she saw Babushka bending over a mattress on the floor. Natalya was laying on it, and Karina could see that she had a deep bite or scratch on her face. She picked up the box of chicken and went inside, kicking the door closed behind her. There had been five bodies lying on various cots around the room when she came in. Three of them were now sitting bolt upright, and the other two had turned their heads in her direction. They weren't curious about who was here, but they had smelled the meat. She looked around and wished that she had brought ten chickens instead of only five.

Babushka looked up and smiled at her. She gave her a smile and wave as she headed to the kitchen with the food. On her way into the kitchen, she heard things being thrown around in the studio. She was distracted and not looking where she was going, and she barreled right into Igor's chest.

"Oh, Igor. I'm sorry."

"You brought meat," he said with a grin and got even closer to her.

"So did you, now get it off me or lose it," Karina said.

"You're so intolerant since you've been with Jack."

"I've always been intolerant. You've just never respected me until Jack was in the picture."

"Point taken. Hey, do you want to see our pet?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, not in the mood to spar with him. "Let me set the chicken down." As they passed back by the studio, she asked, "Is that commotion from Ivan or the ghost?"

"It's the ghost. Noisy bastard. Babushka said she'd go try and calm him after everyone is patched up."

"Where's Ivan?"

"He's up in his room. She patched him up first and they spent quite a while talking. He's sleeping it off." He took her to a table by the end of the stairs. There was something on it covered in a piece of black cheesecloth. He pulled off the cloth and there it was, a vampire bat. It was hanging by its feet from the top of the cage with its eyes closed. Igor stuck his finger through the bars and poked it. It didn't even flinch.

"Is it alive?"

"Yeah, he's faking it. I'm just waiting for Ivan to wake up. Then we'll put the bright lights on him. That will wake him up."

"He's kind of interesting looking," Karina said.

"He's hideous. You don't have to be polite to the bat, Karina. Let's go eat some chicken." Igor put the cover back on the bat cage and headed for the kitchen.

"I'm going to see if Babushka needs some help first. Do not eat all

my chicken!"

Igor didn't answer her, he just threw a mischievous grin over his shoulder.

Karina went over to where Babushka was now ministering to Hannibal.

"Hi, Babushka."

"Hi, Hannibal," she said.

"Hi, Karina," Hannibal said. He was like a little kid, always happy.

"Are you okay? I heard you saved the day for Igor today."

Hannibal grinned from ear to ear at that.

"You should've seen that thing squirt blood when I bit it."

"Igor described it to me," she said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just got a little bite on my arm. Hopefully, I don't turn into a vampire now."

Karina smiled at him, indulgently. "I don't think it works that way, Hannibal. I think you and the vampire have to drink each other's blood, right, Babushka?"

Babushka finished cleaning Hannibal's wound and put a clean gauze over it. She stood up. "Yes, Hannibal. Karina is right. You have to be born a vampire, or share blood with the vampire that bites you."

"Why would I do that?" Hannibal asked.

Babushka patted him on the head and said, "You wouldn't. You're too smart for them. Karina, dear, let's eat so that I can go calm that ghost. His noise is giving me a headache."

They went out into the kitchen where Igor was finishing up one of the chickens. Babushka gave him a look and said, "I certainly hope you brought him his own?"

Karina laughed. "Yes, I brought five. I'm thinking now, I should have doubled it."

"Or tripled it," Igor said as he grabbed another and stood up.

"Where are you going with that?" Karina asked.

"To feed the Alpha, of course."

Igor left and Karina found some clean glasses and ice and poured her and Babushka some soda. She sat down across from her and as they heard another loud crash against the wall in the studio, Karina said, "So, tell me about that."

Babushka smiled. "He is quite a pill when he's angry."

"And what is he so angry about?"

"I wish I knew," Babushka said. "He drew me a few pictures last night. They were of vampires, so he's aware of what is going on here. He also drew one of a window on the outside of a house that looked like this one. There was a bat with its wings spread. It was pressed against the glass. And then, he painted one that I found most interesting of all. It looks like Dmitri. He's sitting at a bar with a man

and down at the end of the bar is a woman who looks very familiar to me, but I'm unsure where I've seen her. I'll have to go home tonight and give it some more thought, maybe I'll meditate on it. My special visitor should be coming on Friday, according to the tea leaves."

Karina smiled. "You have such a knack for sounding so casual about it all."

Babushka shrugged. "When you live as long as I do, you have to learn how to take these things with a grain of salt."

"Did your visit last night at least calm him for a while?"

"Yes, the boys said he allowed them to sleep last night and didn't start being loud again until late this morning."

Karina chuckled. "That was polite of him."

They finished their lunch and went back into the other room. Ivan was up, and everyone was sitting up on their cots now, already healing from Babushka's gentle touch. They were looking over toward where Ivan and Igor stood next to the cage.

Babushka squeezed Karina's hand and said, "Keep your distance from that thing. They are capable of doing much more damage than they did today."

"I will," Karina said. "You be careful in there."

Once again, Babushka said, "Grigori wouldn't harm me."

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Jack tried calling Karina again, but there was still no answer. It was almost 1 p.m. She was probably still at lunch with Babushka. His hands and feet felt like tiny little needles were sticking out of them. It was such a bizarre feeling because even when he changed under the full moon, he had never felt like this. He was definitely getting hairier by the minute, though.

He looked back down at his hands. The backs of them were covered with hair. He didn't know what he was going to do if he had to chase this scumbag on foot today. His feet were also covered with hair and the pulse in them was throbbing so hard now that he didn't just feel it, he could actually hear the rush and pound in his ears.

He decided to try calling Babushka. If anyone besides Karina would know what was happening to him, she would. His phone call went to her voicemail. She and Karina were probably having girl talk over their food.

***

Karina stood next to Ivan as Igor pulled the cloth off the cage. The vampire bat still hung there, eyes closed. "What's the plan?"

“He has to be hungry by now,” Ivan said, “We’ll tempt him with a snack.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out an old pocketknife. When he opened up the blade, Igor and Karina took a step back. That made Ivan laugh. “It’s not silver,” he said. It was a werewolf instinct to run when you saw the flash of a knife.

“Ivan, what in the world are you doing?” Karina asked him, as he put the blade to the palm of his hand.

“Feeding our pet,” he said, slicing the blade along his hand. He opened the cage then with his other hand and slid the bleeding one inside. The bat didn’t move, and Karina was beginning to wonder if it was even breathing. They watched in silence, and every one of them jumped, and Karina may even have screamed, when the rodent with wings suddenly opened his red eyes and attached his fangs to Ivan’s hand.

“Oh, my God, Ivan. Does it hurt?” Karina asked him.

“Not really,” he said. “I think they have some kind of numbing chemical in their mouths.”

“It’s venom,” Babushka said as she came up softly behind them. No one had even noticed that the tantrum in the other room had stopped. “It’s going into your system as he drinks your blood. It’s designed to kill your heart, if you were fully human.”

“Get it off of him!” Karina shouted, grabbing Ivan’s arm. Babushka put one of her hands on the one Karina held onto Ivan’s arm with.

“It’s okay, *malyutka*. He may get weak and dizzy, and he may have bad dreams for a day or two. He’s a werewolf, full-blooded. Vampires can’t kill us any other way than other creatures can. The only advantage they do have is their powers of hypnosis. Do not look into his eyes, and do not give him a chance to overpower you. They are very strong. I’m going to go home now,” she said. Then she did something strange. She looked at Karina and then Igor and said, “No matter what happens, have faith in your Alpha male.”

Karina thought Babushka was acting strangely, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it right now. It was just after one and she needed to go, too, in order to keep her two o’clock appointment. She was curious to see what happened with the bat, but she had to put her paying client first. Squeezing Ivan on the shoulder, she said, “You’re very brave. I don’t think I could just calmly stand there while a vampire drank my blood.”

Ivan smiled at her. “You could do it.”

“Blech. Not a chance. I have to go, I have an appointment. Babushka, do you want me to drop you at home?”

“No. I will take the bus. You go to work.”

Karina kissed her, said goodbye to Igor and the others and left.

Babushka left not long after. She had gone back into the studio

one more time. When she left, she had a canvas under her arm. Ivan would call if he needed her. She had to get ready for her special visitor, the one that the tea leaves had let her know was coming.

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Chapter Eleven

Karina looked at her phone when she got in the car and realized that Jack had called several times. She was worried as she dialed him back.

"Karina!" he said when he answered the phone.

"Hey, I'm sorry I missed your calls. I was at the den, and it was a madhouse."

"I thought you were having lunch with Babushka."

"I did, at the den," she said. "We ended up devouring five rotisserie chickens from Von's." She told him what had happened when the pack had gone to the vampire bat caves and then what took place while she was at the house. She also told him about Babushka and the paintings.

"Does Ana think he was trying to warn about the vampires?"

"Partially, she says that he also made a painting of Dmitri and a man, who I can only assume was Cheung Lee, and a woman who she thinks she vaguely recognizes. The tea leaves told her she would have a special visitor, so she is expecting one tomorrow. She's acting a little strangely and—get this—Ivan is letting the bat suck blood from his hand."

"That's creepy! Obviously, you had a big day at the den," he said. "So, I also have weird happenings."

"Weird happenings? That's rare."

He laughed at her sarcasm. "My hands and feet started the tingling thing again earlier, and now, I am sitting in my car with hands and feet that are covered with hair. It's grown gradually over the past hour."

"That's odd. We aren't having a full moon tonight. Is the fur growing anywhere else? On your face?"

Jack had checked in the rearview mirror just a bit ago. He checked again and said, "No, just the hands and feet. Do you know what is going on? I'm a made werewolf and suddenly, I have symptoms of a born werewolf who can change at will. Can this happen?"

"I'm not sure. I'll ask Babushka if she knows what's going on. Have you been intentionally trying to change?"

"Not really. I've been mostly busy with non-werewolf things."

"Are you okay? I'm pulling into a parking spot near my office," she told him. "I have a two o'clock appointment and—back to back—a three o'clock appointment. Do you need me to cancel them and come get you?"

"No, don't cancel anything," he said. "I'm fine. Maybe I'll just call Babushka and get her take on this."

"She'll know what's going on. Just an FYI, I promise to still love

you with hairy knuckles."

"What if my back gets hairy, too?"

"In or out of werewolf form?" she asked.

"Out?"

"Well, either you'll let me wax it or we had a good run." She laughed so Jack would know she was just teasing.

He kidded back, "That was like a silver blade to the heart. I can't help what I am."

"Welcome to my world," she said.

After they hung up, Karina called Babushka and told her what was happening to Jack. After a minute or so, Babushka admitted she had cast a spell on Jack. A witch spell. To make him transform from a made werewolf into a born werewolf.

"Why would you do that, Babushka?" Karina asked, shocked. "Why?"

"To make him more powerful. To allow him to become a full Alpha wolf. To fulfill a prophecy."

"Oh, my God. You did this without asking anyone, especially him?"

"I didn't know if the spell would work. I hardly ever practice witchcraft anymore, not like in the Old Country."

"Why did you do such a thing? It's not like you!"

"Because I read the tea leaves and the tea leaves said that if I did not help him transform into a born werewolf, he would be killed in his human form and be lost to you forever."

Karina began to cry. "I'm very mad at you right now for doing this to Jack without his consent."

"It had to be done without him knowing about it. Otherwise, the spell would not work."

Karina glanced at the clock. "We need to talk about this in person, but I have business appointments coming, so I have to hang up."

"Don't be angry with me. He will not survive battles without the spell to transform him. Once you understand the big picture, you will thank me for this, Karina."

"I have to go. This conversation isn't over, Babushka."

"It never is." When they hung up, Babushka was crying, too. Perhaps she *had* gone too far without Jack's permission.

***

Karina's two o'clock appointment arrived just after she did. "Welcome, Mr. McAlpine. Thanks so much for coming." They shook hands. "Please have a seat."

The man sat. "Can I ask why you're investigating this man? Who

hired you?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "I can't tell you either of those things. It's confidential."

"I figured as much. I was just being nosy." He paused. "I brought the photos that you asked for."

While he was taking them out, Karina asked, "Mr. McAlpine, do you know what Nate Klein does for a living?"

"He makes documentaries, I believe. I've never seen them, but he liked to tell people how good he was at it." He pulled a manila envelope from his briefcase.

Karina took it and slid out the photos. The first one was of the living room and hallway. He must not have hired anyone after Uri to clean his carpets. They were filthy, stained with substances she wasn't even sure she wanted to imagine.

"When you pulled up the carpets, what was the floor like underneath?"

"Ruined," he said, "There are photos of it, too. Those stains on his carpet were blood, urine and feces, I'm sure. It had seeped through the carpets to the floor and ruined it, as well. We had to do a complete renovation."

"Sheesh." She looked at a few more photos. "Is this the master bedroom?"

The man looked at the photo she held. "Yes, it is. There were holes drilled into that wall and chunks of paint and plaster gone where heavy items had been bolted there. The man lived like a pig."

Karina nodded as she looked at the photos. There was something about the pattern, or the outline of the dust really, of the thing that had been hanging on his wall. It looked familiar.

"Mr. McAlpine, do you mind if I make copies of these?"

"Those are copies, Miss Nosova. You're welcome to keep them."

"Thank you so much."

She asked him a few more questions about Klein's character, relatives, visitors, etc.

He didn't really know much about him, only what had been on his paperwork with the homeowners' association.

"You have been very helpful," she said.

"Miss Nosova, I didn't know him well, but when I was in that place, before we cleaned it out I felt something evil. It could have just been the filth and my disgust, but it felt evil in there. Everyone that went in there during renovations got a strange feeling. I just hope you're careful if you are getting anywhere in that guy's proximity."

"I will be," she said. "Thanks for the warning."

As he was leaving, Viktor Glazkov was arriving. He smiled and greeted her warmly.

“Jenika is getting better every day. Most of her lasting wounds are emotional, but she is getting help.”

“I’m so glad to know that, Viktor,” Karina told him. “What about you and your fiancé?”

Looking embarrassed, he said, “That’s actually what I am here about. My fiancé and I were doing very well. We were planning our wedding and getting closer every day. But then, she started acting strangely. She was always looking over her shoulder, and she worried if a stranger got close to us. I thought she was having some kind of illness, in her head maybe.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Why?”

“My sister suggested that she was smoking things. Nina wouldn’t tell me what was wrong, and she would cry when I asked. I finally told her we would have to call off the wedding if she couldn’t tell me what bothered her. That was when she finally told me the truth. She said that she did some modeling when she first came to the United States. She was very young then, only seventeen. As a matter of fact, she was too young, because they modeled her without clothes. She started getting letters from these men, and pictures that show her body. They want money, or they say they will circulate them over the Internet with her name on them.”

“Viktor, child pornography is a crime, and so is blackmail. You and Nina need to report this to the police.”

“I agree, but she is so afraid that her father will find out, and disown her. She says she did the ‘modeling’ without his knowledge. She also acknowledges that at the time, no one forced her to do it. She was, how do you say? Obsessed? With the money and all of the nice things she was able to buy with it. I told her that she was young, and didn’t know better. The men should have. Nina is studying to be a doctor. She only has two years of medical school left. Her father is so proud of her. If these photos come out, she’s afraid she will be ruined.”

“I’m not sure what I can do, Viktor.”

“My request is odd. I’m not here to ask you to take this case in the sense of solving it. I’m here to ask you as a young Russian immigrant to speak to my Nina, and encourage her to go to the police. She won’t listen to me, and Jenika is still too ill. I don’t want her to be involved in anything that will be stressful. I will pay you to do this. The same as I did for finding my sister.”

Karina thought about Lexi and how working as an escort had dragged her down. She shook her head. “I will talk to Nina for you, Viktor, but I won’t take your money. What I would like to ask you to do, is take the money you were willing to pay me, and donate it to one of the causes for young women. One of the agencies that are

working to stop exploitation and sex trafficking. If you'll agree to that, I will meet and talk to Nina."

Viktor grinned broadly. "You are a kind lady."

"Years ago, I knew someone who was exploited in much the same way as her. Someone I loved very much."

"How is she doing these days?"

"She's dead. Murdered."

"I'm so sorry. So, this is for her?"

Karina nodded.

"What was her name?"

"Lexi."

"Pretty name."

Karina nodded sadly. Then Karina and Viktor set up a date and time for her to meet with Nina. As soon as he left, she called Jack.

"How's it going?"

"Babushka says that I need to concentrate harder. I have to block everything else out of my mind and think only of becoming the wolf."

"Did it work?"

He sighed, heavily. "Not exactly, yet anyway. I have hair everywhere now, even a unibrow."

"Oh, you poor thing. I'll come and get you. Where are you?"

"In Century City. I appreciate it, but I need to stay here. Hair or not, this guy I'm watching is not going to give me the slip tonight. I'm on surveillance."

"Do you need me to bring you food?"

"I'm okay for now. If this goes too much further, I'll call you."

"Okay, keep me posted. I'm going to the den to see where we are with the vampire bat."

"Great," he said, sarcastically. "Be safe."

"All of this isn't making you wish you'd fallen in love with a 'normal' girl, is it?"

"Define normal."

"I guess you're right. Neither of us really knows anyone normal, werewolf or not. I'll talk to you soon, Jack."

They said their goodbyes.

Jack pressed the end button and looked at his face in the mirror. He hoped to God he was parked far enough away from the building that no one would park next to him. By the hour, he was looking more and more like Michael Landon in that old werewolf movie.

***

Karina arrived at the den to find Ivan back in his room, sulking, according to Igor.

“He says this was a stupid idea, and that all we did was catch a vampire bat.”

Karina sat down and reached into the bag of chips Igor was munching on. “There are no vampire bats in Los Angeles.”

Igor looked over toward the cage and said, “Then, what do you call that thing?”

“I’d say he has to, straight up, be a vampire and is just masquerading in bat form, much as we can transform into wolves. Maybe he is hoping if he plays possum long enough, we’ll set him free.” She looked at the clock. “It’s after four. The sun is the hottest this time of day. Maybe our ‘pet’ needs a bit of fresh air.”

Igor nodded. “I did open the curtains for him, but he covered his face with his wings. I think some fresh air might be just what the doctor ordered.” Igor went and got the cage. The bat didn’t move as he threw the black cover over him. They went out to the back yard, and found a spot where they could feel the heat of the sun. They sat the cage on a chair there and uncovered it.

It was obvious that the bat didn’t like daylight. He curled his wings tighter around himself and tucked his head lower into them. He sat there like that for a few minutes, and then he began to wiggle and squirm. A strange vapor started coming off of him then, and the stench was back.

As Igor and Karina watched with equal amounts of fascination and horror, the little black bat began to change. The vapor filled his cage until he was hardly visible. Then, the cage completely exploded and a body emerged from the vapor.

Karina knew she wasn’t supposed to look directly at it, but she had never seen anything like it. This was not the vampire of her nightmares, or books or movies. He was white. Really, really white. He didn’t have any hair, anywhere. His body looked like it had been shaved, and then dipped in paint. He had all the same parts as other humans, but they just looked different. His ears sat low on his white bald head and his red eyes sat right alongside of his nose.

As he came toward Karina, Igor reminded her to avert her eyes, she glanced at him and realized Igor had already shed his clothing and morphed into wolf form.

Karina had almost been shocked into immobility, but Igor’s action caused her to react. She watched as Igor snarled and circled the “thing,” while she stripped off her own clothes and morphed as well.

The white, bald thing looked at the two werewolves then, as if he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do. Finally, he reached for the white wolf. As he picked her up around the neck with one powerful hand, the black-and-silver wolf clamped his powerful jaws down on his arm. The thing had one animal dangling from his hand, and another from

his arm when there was the sound of breaking glass above them. The creature looked up just in time to see a massive gray wolf leaping down from the second story. In surprise, he let go of the other two just as the big one hit him and knocked him to the ground face down.

With rapid ease, the big wolf picked him up by the back of his neck and flipped him over on his back. Then he put his teeth around the front of his neck, but didn't clamp down. The other big one stood on the bottom half of his body, and held his teeth perilously close to the vampire. The white wolf had run inside, and he didn't know why until she came back as a girl who carried a hammer and a very long nail.

She walked over to them and said, "I can't find a railroad spike, but I found a long nail in the studio," she said. "Move over a little, Ivan. I can't get to his heart."

The vampire felt the nail pierce the skin on his chest as she stuck it in slightly with her fingers and readied to drive it in with the hammer.

"Enough! What is it you canines want from me?" he demanded in a deep, gravelly voice.

Karina was shocked, but recovered quickly and said, "The creature speaks."

He looked angry as he said, "I am no more a creature than you are. You're the ones who kidnapped me, attacked me and are threatening to kill me. What gives you the right?"

Ivan changed back then, and keeping his foot on the man's throat he said, "Because first, you took my wife and my child."

Karina was confused. Why did Ivan think the vampires had taken Tatiana and Abram? She thought they wanted to use them for their psychic powers. She looked up at the window and realized that Ivan had known all along what caused those ruts in the wood, or for some reason, he was suspicious. She would get the story later. Right now, the thing under her hammer and nail was indignant.

"Your wife? Your child?"

The thing said, "No werewolf. My daughter, my grandson, my legacy."

Karina gasped and dropped the nail. Igor changed just as the creature levitated upward, knocking Igor and Ivan to the ground. Ivan scrambled to get hold of the creature's leg and as he rose now, Ivan went with him. When they reached the second-story level, the thing changed back into a bat, Ivan fell to the ground hard and the vampire bat flew away.

Karina and Igor ran over to where Ivan lay crumpled. Igor turned him over. It didn't look like his neck was broken.

"Ivan!" Igor yelled at him. "Open your eyes, brother, and tell us

what that was about!"

Ivan pulled his eyes open and looked at Karina and his brother. "I mated with a vampire. And apparently, my father-in-law is not happy with his daughter, Tatiana's choices." He closed his eyes again.

"Igor, I think we should get him inside," Karina told him. "He's hurt." For a minute, she thought Igor was going to refuse, but then he stood up, lifting his brother with him. He carried him into the empty house.

Realizing for the first time that no one else was around, Karina asked, "Igor, where is the rest of the pack?"

He looked at his twin and said, "He gave them money and told them to go eat, see a movie, have a good time. You knew, didn't you, brother? You planned to confront him while we were all gone, only I didn't go and I screwed up your plan."

Ivan opened his eyes then and tried to sit up.

Karina put her hand on the back of his head to help him. It was bloody. "Ivan, you're bleeding."

"I'm fine," he said, looking at his brother.

"You knew what Tatiana was? You invited a vampire into our pack and you procreated with her?"

"No, Igor. I didn't know. Not until last night."

"How?" Karina asked.

"Babushka. I don't think she ever really planned on bringing Lexi back, she knew you wouldn't let her. She wanted the two of you to remember that night, in the cave."

"Why?" Igor asked him. "Why didn't she just tell us?"

"You'll have to ask her that. But I can tell you how she knew about Tatiana and the vampires and everything else. Grigori told her. That's what all of his commotion has been about."

"How did this happen?" Karina asked.

"He came here that night after the battle with Dmitri she says, inside of me. That evil was inside of me. She told me that the reason Tatiana couldn't give birth in her human form that night was because the part of her that is alive is the werewolf. As we know, vampires are undead. It was too much for me to process."

"This is unbelievable," Karina said.

"I know it's a lot to understand. Maybe that's why Babushka wanted the two of you to pull your memories out on your own. I freaked and I told her she was a crazy old woman. She didn't get mad, she just said, "Okay, then I will just have to bring Lexi back so that you can hear all of this from someone you trust."

Karina held back tears. "Go on."

"I felt terrible when she said that. I have always trusted Babushka. She's been like a grandmother to all of us. But I was still angry and

stubborn and I told her to do it, bring Lexi back. So that's what she told you she was going to do, knowing that one of you would stop her. She somehow made you remember that night. I don't know how she does these things. I wasn't finished being angry with her, though. I was blaming her for my own bad fortune and mistakes. That night when we went to the caves and there were no bats there, I told her again that she had been wrong. She told me they would be back when the sun came up, and when I found them, that I should take the one that slept alone at the head of them all. He would be the one that knew where to find my son."

Igor and Karina were staring at him, both of them wishing they could disbelieve what they were hearing.

"Dear heaven. So, what now?" Karina said. "We've let him get away… the slanted man."

Igor looked at her like she was crazy. "What is a slanted man?"

"Babushka has apparently known something since the first night Tatiana and the baby disappeared. Maybe not all of it, but some basics, anyway. The tea leaves told of two men and one woman. I think now that was us. The slanted tea leaf represented an untrustworthy man. That was him, Tatiana's father. And the arrow pointed to evil. I'm guessing that evil was Grigori. Or maybe it was vice versa, I don't know. But what now? I doubt they will still be there, this vampire clan. There are thousands of caves in this area alone. How will we find them now?"

"Why would we want to?" Igor said, defiantly. "She's one of them, she's evil. Undead."

Ivan was livid. "She's only half undead. And what about my son, Igor? Do you think the same of your nephew?"

Igor looked away from his brother's eyes, hung his head toward the floor. "No. Abram is one of us. He is our legacy."

"That's what that thing said about him. But he said that Abram is *his* legacy." Ivan looked up with wet eyes. "We have to find my son. My vampire-werewolf son."

"I'll call my grandmother," Karina said. She was angry that Babushka had lied to her. She thought about Lexi again, the way that Babushka had admitted running with her in the moonlight before she died. It wasn't the first lie she'd been told. How many more were there?

***

Exactly at 4:30 p.m., Jack saw Justin Browning come out of the building he had under surveillance. He looked in the mirror again. "I still look like Wolfman Jack," he said aloud to himself, not at all

amused. He watched Justin trot across the street and head for the bus stop.

"Why the hell is he riding the bus?" Jack got on the phone and called one of the junior investigators that worked with him, a guy named Greg. He gave Greg the address of the bus stop and asked him to look up that bus route after it left this particular stop.

Greg put him on hold and came back a few minutes later. "It goes to Culver City," the guy told him.

"That's like three miles from here. Why the hell is he taking the bus?"

"Three point seven miles, and I have no idea, Jack."

Jack thanked him and hung up. He turned on the ignition as he saw the bus pulling up to the curb. He glanced at himself again. This hairy werewolf look might work in Century City and Hollywood, but in Culver City, he'd stick out like a sore thumb.

Babushka had told him to come by her house and she would try to figure out what was going on that he was between man and werewolf and was unable to fully transform. She seemed to think that the Alpha in him was trying to rise, and force him to become the wolf, with or without the moon. He was anxious to find out, but as he waited for his suspect to board the bus, he knew what he had to do. He had to go find out what this guy was up to, and make sure that he didn't hurt anyone else.

***

Babushka came over right away. She was disappointed to hear that the vampire had gotten away. Once again, she patched up Ivan and then, when she and Karina were alone, the spit hit the fan.

"I think you and I have a lot to talk about, Babushka."

The old woman said, "Let's go see if there's any tea in the house."

Karina followed her into the kitchen and sat down while Babushka rummaged around until she found the tea and a pot to brew it in. Once the pot was on the stove, she, too, sat down.

Babushka looked at Karina. "I know you have a lot of questions. Ask them. I will answer them as well as I can."

Karina had so much swirling around in her head, but she took a deep breath, and tried to ask the questions in order. "Let's start with this: who commissioned Ivan to do the painting?"

"I had nothing to do with that, *malyutka*. I truly don't know the answer."

"Okay, let's try talking about Grigori. Did you know he came home with Ivan that night?"

"No, Karina. I found that out through my communications with

Grigori."

"And he can talk now?" Karina asked.

"No, not as you and I can talk. I've finally figured out how to accept him into my head. I can hear him inside my mind much as werewolves communicate telepathically with each other in our four-legged forms."

"What does my grandfather have to say?"

"First of all, Grigori's spirit came here with Ivan. He needed a medium, a means of travel. He said he had gone to the observatory that night. Interestingly enough, he tried to go into Jack, but couldn't make a connection. Ivan came by a few seconds later, and he used him as his medium home. He was here long enough to notice unusual things that Tatiana seemed to do when no one else was around. He said that she hid in the studio one day with a mouse. He thought she was going to eat it, but he said she just sank her teeth into it and sucked out all of its blood."

"Ugh!" Karina exclaimed.

"She took the carcass outside right away, so none of the others would find it. That was when he knew that she wasn't only a werewolf, but something else as well. The night that she and the baby were taken, he said that she didn't want to go. He heard her tell her father that she loved Ivan, and loved her life here. Her father told her that it was her choice. Either she went with them and the baby or she stayed with Ivan, but either way, Tatiana's father was taking the baby."

"Poor Tatiana. She literally had no choice in the matter," Karina said.

"No, she didn't. Any good mother would have gone with her child, as she did."

"How did you know Igor and I would know about the vampires and where to find them?"

"I didn't, Grigori did. He's always been a sensitive, a medium. I asked him if anyone in the house might know where to find them, and he said that you and Igor had memories that neither of you had touched for a very long time. He just strummed your memories a bit."

"He was in my head?" Karina asked. It was a creepy thought.

"Are you going to be like Ivan now and call him evil?" Babushka asked. "What has he done but help us, Karina?" Babushka looked so tired and sad. "If not for Grigori, I would have died with my family. He could only save one Romanov and he chose me."

Karina reached for her grandmother's hand. She squeezed it gently and said, "Babushka, I know that everything you do is about protecting us, even when you fudge the truth a bit. And as far as Grigori goes, I don't believe you could have ever loved an evil man.

Your heart is too good."

Babushka squeezed her hand back. "Now, let's talk about Jack becoming a born werewolf and my witch spell that seems to be taking forever to work right."

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Chapter Twelve

Jack watched the bus pulling away from the curb. He was about to pull out into traffic and follow it, when he realized there was a black Jeep Cherokee parked a few spaces back from the bus stop. As the bus pulled out, so did the Cherokee. The suspect obviously knew he was being followed. He wanted Jack to think he had gotten on that bus. He couldn't see the driver of the Cherokee, but he went with his gut. He had a strong feeling that Browning was in that vehicle, so he followed it, instead of the bus.

It was hard to stay incognito as he drove up Olympic Boulevard. People in cars around him would stare and point and wave at his increasing hairiness. They probably thought he was in movie makeup. He could also feel his body getting closer to a complete change, but he couldn't stop now. He surprised himself by praying that he wouldn't completely change before he got where he was going and out of this car.

Browning suddenly got on the freeway, the 405 North, and Jack merged behind him, trying to stay close enough that Browning couldn't lose him, and far enough away that Browning didn't know he was being followed. He saw the black Cherokee merge onto the 101 South then, and he continued to follow it until it got off on Glendale Boulevard, and almost immediately turned into an IHOP parking lot. Jack parked in the Subway parking lot across the street and watched him park and go inside the IHOP.

He thought, *A few pancakes and about a pound of bacon sounds great about now.*

Being suddenly ravenous wasn't the worst of his troubles, though. Jack now felt himself changing completely. He had the foresight to open the car door before the loss of his opposable thumbs, but his clothes were going to be lost forever. He stood behind the Subway and burst from the clothes that still clung to his body. He knew he was going to cause a stir, but there was no getting around it at this point. He ran across Glendale Boulevard on four legs. Horns honked and people yelled. He was certain that phone cameras were rolling as well. He hoped if they were going to put him on the news that they at least got his best side.

Just as he reached the other side of the street, he heard a woman scream. It was a blood-curdling scream, and since he wasn't at her throat, he would say she was overreacting. When she stopped screaming, she started yelling, "Call animal control!"

He tried to shout, "I'm not an animal!" but it came out as a wolf snarl.

Some people just couldn't mind their own business.

Jack ran into the parking lot and ducked behind the black Cherokee. He was too big to hide for long, and he really didn't want to have to call Karina and have her bail him out of the animal shelter the first time he ran alone. He found an old pickup with the window down, and he jumped through it into the cab of the truck. As he lay panting on the torn vinyl seat, he hoped that Browning wouldn't come out and take off while he was in hiding. Or the other alternative, which was that the owner of the pickup, a thirty-something cowboy-looking guy, would come back and get out a weapon. The cowboy opened the driver's side door, and when he saw the wolf on his seat, his eyes got huge in surprise, but to his credit, he didn't go overboard like the lady had.

Jack jumped out past the shocked young man and took off running, glancing over his shoulder in time to see the drama queen lady talking to a cop. He hesitated too long and she saw him. He was at least a hundred yards from her, but she started screaming again, alerting the cop.

Jack had to haul ass now. The cop was on his radio calling for backup, and people were coming out of the IHOP to see what was going on in the parking lot.

Jack ran northeast on Glendale Avenue until he got to North Verdugo. Less than a half a mile up, he made a right on north Mountain Street. He knew he had to still be causing a stir, but he was too busy getting the hell out of there to turn around and see who was behind him, or who was watching him.

He ran into Brand Park. In a thirty-something acre park, there had to be somewhere for a wolf to hide. He took one of the hiking trails up to the base of the mountain and found an area of thick brush where he could lay down and regroup. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He had his tongue hanging out, panting again. He knew it probably wasn't very attractive, but what was a wolf to do? As the sun began to dip down behind the mountains, he started to breathe easier. The cover of darkness was a good thing to have for a rogue werewolf in the city. A very good thing.

***

Karina kept trying to contact Jack, but he wasn't answering his phone. She was restless and full of adrenaline after their fight with the vampire. She was worried about Jack, too. Babushka seemed to think the Alpha in him was coming to the surface, and God only knew what that would mean when he and Ivan met up again.

She had left the werewolf twin brothers at the den, trying to come up with a new plan to find Abram. Babushka had said that Rasputin

had gone quiet, apparently having nothing new to offer. After she'd dropped her grandmother at home, she went back to her apartment. She was trying to work, trying to make some sense out of the photographs that McAlpine had given her, but it was too quiet here, and she couldn't think. It had been such a crazy week that she had actually gotten used to the commotion.

She reached for the remote control and turned on the television. She put it on the news channel she liked to listen to and turned back to her laptop just in time to hear the female anchor say, "Once again, a wolf has been seen running through the streets of the city. This time, in Glendale. Maria Lancaster has the story."

On the screen, the anchor was interviewing a woman in front of the IHOP. The woman seemed distraught and her voice was shaky as she said, "It ran right past me and into the parking lot. It was huge. It could have killed me."

Karina rolled her eyes. The woman seemed overly dramatic to her.

They flashed then to a man dressed in Western clothes, standing in front of a battered green pickup. He was saying, "I just pulled open my door and there it was. He was a giant one, all right. Biggest brown wolf I ever seen."

"Oh, my God, it's not Babushka. It's Jack!" Karina said aloud, just as her phone rang. It was Babushka.

"Babushka! Turn on the news," she said as she answered the phone.

"I know, *malyutka*. It's Jack, isn't it?"

"My poor Jack! The changing must have caught him off guard."

Babushka actually laughed before she said, "Let's just hope he wasn't driving while under the influence of werewolf."

***

In his wolf form, Jack lay in the itchy brush until it was dark. He was glad his dark fur provided some camouflage. In his four-legged form, he cautiously made his way back down the trail toward the park. He could hear and smell humans, probably homeless people camped out under the trees, but he couldn't see anyone. When he got back near the street, he went behind a gas station to get his bearings and also figure out which way to go.

As he was now sitting there on his rump pondering it all, he suddenly changed back into his man form. Now, he was on Mountain Avenue in Glendale, still early enough in the evening that there were lots of people out and about, and he would have just made his way back to his vehicle except for one thing: *he was nude.*

He was in front of a trash bin where with some effort, and

minimal gagging, he was able to find a pair of socks and a blanket that smelled of cat pee. He put on the socks and tied a cat-lady's discarded blanket under his arms. As casually as he could, he started walking back toward the IHOP. The blanket and the socks, or both, smelled horrible, but Jack strolled right by several people and groups of people. Nary a soul even looked up at him, or if they did, they averted their eyes as if afraid he was going to panhandle near them.

Jack was ecstatic to find that Justin Browning's Jeep Cherokee was still in the lot at the IHOP. He was worried that maybe Justin had left with someone else at first, but when he got close to the building, he could see him still inside, on his cell phone. He was sitting at the counter alone with a coffee cup in front of him. Jack found that odd, the guy had been in there for a long time. He wondered what the hell he was waiting for. Whatever pancakes he must have eaten were consumed a while ago, and now, he was just nursing coffee refills and on the phone.

Jack made his way over to where the Cherokee was parked. Praying there was no alarm, he pulled on the handle of the back door. It was unlocked. Once he slipped inside, he could see why. The interior was stripped bare. There were no seats in back nor carpet or even mats. It was a bare, metal floor with hooks. There was literally nothing else in there, and if the guy didn't smell him right away, he would surely see him. Jack realized this wasn't going to work and started to slip back out, just as the front door of the IHOP opened. He crouched behind the driver's seat, so when the guy glanced in the back, he didn't see Jack.

Browning started the vehicle, and Jack had to hold on tight to the bottom of the seat to avoid being thrown back and forth around the back as the driver took sharp turns, as if he were in a hurry to escape Satan or worse. He only drove a few miles before stopping. All Jack could see outside was murky darkness.

Browning opened the car door, stepped out and closed it. Jack waited for the dome light to go off, then he peeked out the window. They were in the same park where Jack had hid earlier, and now, Justin Browning looked like he was waiting for something. Or someone.

Browning kept looking at the face of his phone and turning his body in a circle, as if he was worried that someone would come up behind him. Jack had to keep ducking when Browning turned back toward the vehicle, his nostrils flaring and his lip curled in disgust, as if he had caught wind of something vile—and then, Jack realized that the guy was smelling *him.* Once, he was worried that he had been seen by Browning, but when no one came to roust him out, Jack finally looked back out and saw that Browning was no longer alone.

Now, there was a younger guy standing with him. They were under one of the streetlights and Jack thought the guy looked familiar. He wished he would turn his face toward him just a little bit and then he did. *Hot damn! It's the guy from my dream. The one I chased as a wolf.*

Young Guy and Browning were having a heated discussion that looked like it might escalate into a fight. It looked like the younger guy was getting a tongue-lashing from Browning and backed down, starting to acquiesce. Browning wanted him to do something that Young Guy didn't want to do. It seemed like it was something sordid or disagreeable, but that Browning had something on Young Guy, knew something, and had threatened him with it. Young Guy would nod his head for a while, and then look like he was trying to plead his case. He was instantly shut down each time by the older man.

To Jack's surprise, Browning handed Young Guy some money from his wallet, quite a wad of it. Jack grimaced, thinking it was for a sexual favor that was about to happen, but was surprised when all that happened was that the two men exchanged vehicle keys. Browning started walking away in the other direction, and Young Guy came toward Browning's vehicle, where Jack was hiding.

Jack crouched down and got a grip on the seat. Young Guy didn't even look back there. He was sniffling, and Jack wondered if he was a drug user.

As the vehicle moved, they didn't leave the park, but instead, the kid pointed the Cherokee in the direction of the trails. He drove up to the trail heads and got out, reading the posted signs carefully and choosing a specific trail.

Jack waited a few minutes as Young Guy hesitated and started to come back to the vehicle, stopped, and then made himself go back to the trail heads. Jack then watched as the kid began hiking up one of the trails. He was carrying a small flashlight and when the beam disappeared, Jack knew it was time to get out and follow this guy.

Jack slipped out of the Cherokee, leaving the cat-peed blanket behind. Going up the trail with only crusty socks on was going to be difficult enough without having to deal with running in a makeshift, smelly toga. And yes, he thought there would probably be running.

Young Guy walked slowly and quietly up a deceptively steep trail. They walked for over twenty minutes and Jack matched the fall of his quarry's footsteps, so that every time that Young Guy stopped walking and turned back on the trail to listen, he didn't hear anyone following him.

At a trail marker, Jack heard the other man skid to a sudden stop and sigh loudly. Jack stopped, too, and hid himself in the brush and watched to see what Young Guy was going to do. There was a boulder behind the trail marker and Jack could see the shadow of the guy

picking up something. Something big.

Jack tiptoed to move to where he had a clear view of what Young Guy was doing, not just the shadow of him. He was grunting, gagging and lifting something large and heavy and rolled up in plastic sheeting and bound with bungee cords. It looked like a dead body shape, all packaged up for disposal.

A chill went through Jack.

Shit, this guy is moving one of Justin Browning's kills for him.

Jack watched as he dropped and dragged the plastic roll to the edge of the trail and then lay it down on the dirt and brush. He opened part of the bag and bent over.

The kid was kissing whoever or whatever was in the bag. *Yes, kissing!*

Jack felt his stomach lurch and he almost heaved.

Young Guy closed it all up again, stood back up and then gave it a push so that it rolled down the hill with *thud-thud-thud* sounds as it rolled stiffly down the trail. It hit the bottom of the trail with a thud and the kid hurried down behind it.

Jack stayed in his hiding place behind a tree, trying not to think of all the stickers and rocks poking his feet through those crusty socks.

Once at the bottom, Young Guy opened and lifted the back hatch of the Cherokee. Jack could see him pull out the blanket Jack had left there and look at it quizzically. He gagged, tossed it out and picked up the body package and put it in the car. He reached up to slam the back hatch closed, and began to walk to the driver's side to get ready to leave.

That was when Jack jumped him and took him down.

The fellow screamed like a little girl and it was a pretty interesting tussle between Jack, the naked cop, and Young Guy, who was fighting for his life against a stronger naked assailant.

Jack identified himself as a police officer and told Young Guy to settle down.

Young Guy was not having any of it. He kept screaming and fighting as hard as he could.

Jack, naked or not, was a lot bigger and stronger and eventually subdued the other man with a few wrestling holds. He hated punching people during arrests. It was easier to take them down with some well-placed grips. He also found a gun in the kid's waistband that was going to come in handy.

"Who the hell are you?" Young Guy demanded.

"I told you, I'm a cop," Jack fudged the truth with a grin.

"You're not a cop. You're naked," the other guy said. "You're trying to assault me, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. Far from it."

“Then what happened to your clothes?”

“I ask the questions here. And I give the orders. Right now, you just lay low.”

Jack stuck his hand inside the rolled-up corpse and felt for a pulse on her neck. There was none. And she reeked of death.

“I assure you, she’s dead,” Young Guy said. “More than a day ago.”

Jack, not taking his eyes off the suspect on whom he now held the gun, said, “Take off your clothes.”

“Screw you,” the other guy said. “I’m not doing that. You don’t have a badge or handcuffs or even your own gun. I don’t have to do what you say. And I won’t! I will fight with everything I am and make sure you don’t get what you want from me.”

Big words from a small guy with a gun trained on his head.

“Let me rephrase. Give me your clothes or I’ll shoot you in the big toe now and ask questions later, when you’re in the ER and screaming for pain drugs.”

The kid began to see it his way. “You’re really a cop?”

“Under Penal Code 32 for the State of California, you’re under arrest for being an accessory after the fact in what looks like a murder that was probably committed by Justin Browning, who got you into this mess. At the moment, you could be looking at a year in county jail on a misdemeanor accessory charge, at the very least.”

Jack read him the rest of his rights. “If you’re an asshole and pull anything stupid at this point, I’m sure the DA will be interested in adding other charges, such as attempting to conceal evidence, which could mean state prison and up to ten years for each count.”

“Oh, no.”

“I suggest you cop a plea so you won’t do felony time, but I’m not a lawyer—you’ll likely get a free one. Now, take off your clothes, you human filth.”

“I’m clean and I need my clothes!”

“You’ll get a nice roomy jail jumpsuit when you get delivered to booking.”

“Damn it!” He stripped off his long sleeved t-shirt and jeans and threw them at Jack’s feet. “You can’t have my boxers, man. I gotta draw the line somewhere.”

Jack said, “I’m going to have to go commando, but I’ll wash these jeans before I give them back.”

“You’re crazy,” the guy said. “I don’t want my jeans back after your stinky cop ass has been in them. You smell like cat pee, do you know that?”

“That’s funny. You’re the one kissing a dead girl that you have wrapped in a bag, and I’m crazy and smelly? What size shoes do you

wear?"

The guy didn't answer. He just kicked his Nikes over to Jack. "I just bought them!"

"Sit down, you. Give me the new socks, too."

The guy, now barefoot and clad only in his boxers, looked at the ground and back up at Jack.

"I need my kit, man. Big time."

Jack carefully felt in a back pocket of the pants the suspect had given him and took out what he initially had thought was a wallet. But it wasn't. It was a drug user's shooting kit. And he was flush with his next fix.

"I thought I was going to find heroin. Instead I find hospital-grade morphine, complete with the labels consistent with my theory that you stole this from a hospital."

"Give me my medicine."

"Got a prescription, whiny boy?"

"What do you think?"

"Nope." Jack put it on top of the Cherokee. "Evidence for other crimes, if we go that way, too."

"Damn it. Why are you naked? I think that's a fair question since your junk is practically in my face."

"I'm two feet away. It's not in your face." Jack sighed. "Am I going to have to end every sentence with, 'Or I'll shoot you in the big toe?' Sit on the ground and don't move a muscle, especially not the ones connected to your mouth."

The kid sat down, hard, and started crying and pounding the ground with his fist. "I can't go to jail. I just can't! I'm small. Terrible things could happen to me there."

"I'm not gonna lie to you, son. They probably will. If you're lucky, you'll become someone's favorite and get protection. And you might want to sign up for de-tox program. Your time will be well spent if you get off your addiction to morphine."

Young Guy sobbed even harder. "I'll rat out the murderer if it will stop me from going to jail."

"Tell it to your lawyer."

Jack placed the gun on the top of the Jeep, which Young Guy could not reach anyway, not even if he were standing.

"I suppose you're a good shot," Young Guy said between sobs.

"Sniper qualified. Don't test me to see if I'm lying."

"Well, shit. I'll just sit here in my underwear then and save my big toe from a bullet."

"A wise decision," Jack said.

Jack got dressed in the too-small jeans. When he finished, he asked the guy, "Do you think your jeans make my butt look fat?"

The other guy didn't see the humor. Nor did he see the humor when Jack duct-taped his wrists together behind his back because he didn't have any handcuffs and there just happened to be a roll of duct tape in the Cherokee's tool box.

"Listen, I didn't kill her. I just came in after the fact. I didn't want to be involved. He threatened me."

"With what? Care to share the way he had to talk you into it by threatening to tell about something you had done?"

"No, damn it!"

"I saw money change hands, too."

"It was gas money for driving up here!"

"Gas money? Who is Justin Browning to you, anyway? Your dad?"

Young Guy hesitated. "Yeah, he's my dad."

"Yeah, right."

"He *is* my dad!"

"What's your name?"

"Mike Browning."

"Poor you. I suppose the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"Are you profiling me?"

"You're just burying yourself now. I don't want to question you further without your lawyer present. I told you, you have the right to remain silent. I suggest you do. For now."

Jack found the wallet in his front pocket and checked it out. "You work at a hospital?"

"Yeah. But I probably won't after all this."

"I doubt it, too."

"Will they go easier on me if I tell you where and when I was gonna meet up with my dad again to switch our vehicles back?"

"Maybe. I just don't have the power to make that sort of a deal."

Mike Browning spilled the information anyway, trying to elicit sympathy from Jack.

"Thanks for rolling over on your father and telling me where he's going to be and when," Jack said. "Now, are you sure you don't want to remain silent?"

"I have no one else in the world to talk to except a cop with his big-ass stuffed into my skinny jeans."

Jack said, "Don't expect me to have sympathy for the devil. You were just about to put a corpse in your father's vehicle and take it somewhere for final disposal. That corpse was once a vibrant life, and I'm guessing she was a beautiful girl, probably a nice girl, you tool."

"She was beautiful. And nice. *Very* nice, if you get my drift."

"You're sick. I suppose that jail is gonna cure you, one way or another."

Mike started crying again. "I want you to get my dad for doing

this to her."

"Hand him to me on a silver platter, then. And stop him from doing this to another beautiful, nice girl."

"I wish I could have stopped him this time."

"Your words don't ring true. And it's a little late for wishing," Jack said. "You can't change the past, so I suggest you work on changing the future."

The new Nikes were tight on him so Jack ripped out the laces and stuffed them in the jeans pocket of his purloined pants.

"Hey!" Mike Browning protested. "You're ruining my new Nikes."

"Chill. I need to make a phone call." Jack used Mike's cell to call into the office. And then, he called his partner and said, "I need you to pick up Justin Browning on suspicion of murder one. I've got a body and the time and location where Browning is gonna be. I've got his accomplice here and he's throwing his killer dad under the bus."

"After the fact!" Mike yelled. "Tell him it was after the fact!"

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Chapter Thirteen

Ivan was sprawled on his bed. He had gone upstairs when the rest of the pack got back. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now. Igor was still mad at him, and insisting that Tatiana wouldn't be welcome back in the pack, ever again. Ivan was the Alpha, though, whether his twin brother liked it or not. And Ivan would make that decision after he talked to her. He wished the stupid raven would stop pecking on the house for five minutes. His head was pounding.

He was glad that, at least, the spirit of Rasputin seemed to be gone. It had been quiet in the studio all day. Ivan jumped to his feet and went to the window. As he pulled it open, a bat came shooting in and landed on the bed. He stood back for a minute looking at it. It looked disoriented or something. He was ready to change, if he needed to. The bat suddenly began to emit vapors, the way his "father-in-law" had earlier. Ivan changed just as a naked Tatiana appeared on the bed.

"Tatiana! That's you? What the hell? Where is Abram?"

She looked at him forlornly and said, "I'm sorry, Ivan. I love you so. I should have told you about me and about my father."

Ivan bellowed, "Where is our son?"

"I don't have much time, but I'll try to explain. My mother was running in the woods one night when she was shot with a silver bullet by a hunter. My father saw what had happened, and before the hunter could get to what he thought was his kill, my father intervened. When he found her, she was a beautiful naked young woman, bleeding profusely. He realized then what she was, a werewolf, but he couldn't let her die. He felt an attraction to her."

"Our son! Where?"

"I'm getting to that. But listen! He took her to his cave and he made her well. They fell in love, but she couldn't stay with him. She had a family, a pack that she insisted she had to return to. She was pregnant with me when she left. My father found her a year later. He took me, and I was with him until the night I realized that I wasn't only a vampire—I was a werewolf, too."

"Where is our son!"

But Tatiana maddeningly kept on with her story. "I was eleven, I turned into the werewolf I was meant to be and I ran. He found me, he always does. He made me go back, and he told me terrible things about my mother and her pack. When I was sixteen, I met another like me. She had chosen to stay with her lover, but she knew my mother and she told me that she wanted me and she missed me. I ran away again. I got to spend the last four years of my mother's life with her. After she died, I was lost until you found me."

Ivan's pulse raced. "You should have told me instantly what you were."

"I was so afraid that if I told you the truth, you would reject me. I loved you so. I told you what you wanted to hear, and I tried to be what you needed in a mate. But he found me again, and now, he has Abram."

"Where?"

"He's not going to let him go, Ivan. I'm sorry. I won't abandon our child, and when he's old enough, I will tell him who and what he is, and I will send him to find you."

"No!" Ivan spat out at her. "You will tell me where my son is and I will get him now, before it's too late!"

"I can't, Ivan. I'm sorry. He'll hurt me, and then, what will Abram have?"

Ivan changed to his wolf form and jumped toward the bed. He had forgotten the window, however. Before he could even pounce, Tatiana was swallowed up in a thick, smelly vapor and the bat flew over his head and out the window, taking his legacy with her.

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At 1 a.m., Jack finally called Karina.

"Oh, my God, Jack! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he told her. "I could use a shower, but otherwise, fine."

"I saw you on the news, at least, I think I did. Was that you, a hairy wolfish man running naked down the street with the TV network's big black X graphic pasted over your private parts?"

He laughed. "Yeah, that was me. I'll tell you all about it in the morning, okay? I'm going to be stuck at the police station for a while. I caught a serial killer tonight, but I have to explain why he's in his underwear, and how I found him. And I have to deny that I made him strip so I could wear his clothing in order to arrest him with his own gun and take him down to the station."

Karina laughed, too. "Oh, poor Jack. It's all so funny, but sad, too."

"Just like a Russian novel, right?"

She laughed even harder. "Yes, we do love our dark comedies. I'm just glad you're okay. And Jack! You transformed without the full moon!"

"I noticed that part, too, trust me," he said. "I love you so much, Karina. I promise I'll come to you as soon as I can."

"I love you, too, Jack. More than you can imagine."

"Thank you, sweetheart. I'm sure we will laugh together about today. Or just make it go away with hours of crazy sex."

"You're on, for both."

"I'll see you as soon as I can. I've got paperwork and an interrogation to deal with."

"Right."

"Bye, babe."

"Bye, my sweet Jack."

"Love you later." He blew a kiss into the phone and they hung up.

Karina was so relieved. She didn't know if Babushka was asleep or not, so she sent her a text and told her that Jack was okay after his unexpected werewolf transformation when it was *not* the full moon.

Babushka texted back a smiley emoji and the words: *My witch work is done. Now, you can teach him how to control his changing.*

Karina texted back: *Easy for you to say.*

Karina tried to go back to sleep. Her online research had paid off earlier. She had found one of the actresses from Nate the Terrible's movies on Facebook. She had sent her a PM and told her honestly who she was, and that she was hoping for information about Nate Klein for a criminal investigation. The response was almost instant, the woman told her: *He's a freak.*

I gathered that, Karina messaged back with a smiley face. *I was hoping for specifics.*

"Not here on Facebook," the woman said. "Let's meet in person. I don't want any of the juicy stuff in writing."

"When and where?" Karina said.

"Do you have an office?"

Karina gave her the office address and her phone number.

The woman promised, "I'll be there at nine."

Now, after the worry and adrenaline over Jack and the anticipation of meeting this girl in the morning, Karina couldn't sleep. It was probably a good thing, however, because she would have been awakened anyway, moments later, by Igor's call.

"*Syestra*, we have a problem," he said, using the Russian word for sister.

"Tell me about it." Karina found herself longing for the days when she went about her business, pretending that she was an ordinary girl who worked in an ordinary job and didn't know anyone who believed in werewolves. However, she listened as Igor told her what happened between his brother and Tatiana. And Abram.

When he was done, she asked, "This is terrible. So close and yet so far from bringing Abram home. Is Ivan okay?"

"No, he took off for the hills. He's probably going cave to cave, trying to find them. I'm sure it's pointless. He's chasing a werewolf who is also a vampire bat runaway wife. I mean, what are the odds he will ever see her or his son again?"

“I don’t know. Poor Ivan,” she said. “I guess we have to let him grieve in his own way. I don’t think he would listen to any of us right now. We can meet as a pack tomorrow night and try to figure out what to do and see if we can still find Abram and get him back to the safety of Ivan and the pack.”

“Sounds good, wolf sister,” he said. “I just wanted to keep you informed. I trust you in all.”

Karina smiled. It sure did make her happy to know that Igor once again considered her an integral part of the pack.

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Karina was in her office by 8 a.m. She still hadn’t heard from Jack. If he had gotten to go home after booking and questioning the serial killer, the poor guy was probably exhausted and sleeping, so she wasn’t going to bother him yet. She had texted Igor for a status update, and he said that Ivan hadn’t come home yet. Igor was planning to go look for Ivan if he didn’t get home soon. Igor said the rest of the pack members were anxious and restless, worried about what would happen to them now.

At exactly 9 a.m., a very pretty woman arrived at Karina’s office. Karina recognized her as Hayley, the porn actress she had messaged with on Facebook the night before.

“Nice to meet you, Hayley, I’m Karina. Thank you so much for coming.”

Hayley smiled. “I wouldn’t miss a chance to talk trash about that freak, Nate Klein.”

Karina offered her a seat and coffee.

She took the seat and said, “You don’t have anything stronger, do you? Maybe a splash of Bailey’s to spice it up?”

Karina shook her head. “So,” Karina said when Hayley was finally settled. “What can you tell me about Nate Klein aka Nate the Terrible?”

“Well, like I said, the guy is a freak. He was the cameraman on two of my movies. Before I knew him, or had heard the other stories, I agreed to a date with him. He’s kind of cute, until you get to know him and then he’s super creepy.” She paused. “Can I smoke in here?”

“No,” Karina said. “No smoking.”

“Okay. Anyway, we had dinner and drinks and went back to his place. I should have run as soon as I walked in and smelled the place, and he had no furnishings in his living room. I mean zero!”

That didn’t surprise Karina since Uri, the carpet cleaner had already told her as much.

“Did it make you suspicious that there was no couch or chairs?”

Karina asked.

"Yeah! Of course, I'm thinking it's just a ploy, you know, that there is nowhere to sit so we have to go in the bedroom. It really stinks in there, too, and I finally ask him about it. He acts all butt-hurt and he tells me that he's writing a movie and he's been 'experimenting' with scenes."

"And then what?" Karina asked patiently.

"Then it gets really freaky after I ask what kind of scenes. 'I'll show you,' he said. He pushes a button and part of his wall opens up, just slides open. When the panel is slid all the way back, there's furry, stinking *dead* things hanging from racks."

"Furry, dead things?" Karina asked.

"Yeah, he has some weird fetishes, that's for sure. He's got all these dead raccoons and jackrabbits and squirrels hanging from hooks. He wanted me to have sex with him while he drained the blood from one he just killed and he wanted to paint symbols on my body with the animal blood mixed with his… his stuff, you know what I mean."

Karina gagged. She couldn't even think of how to respond to that. It came out something like, "Whaaat?"

"Yeah, right?" Hayley said. "I didn't walk out of there. I ran!"

Karina tried to gather her composure. "Was he living in the condo, or the house then?"

"No, he lives in a house. It looks out over the Santa Monica Mountains. What a waste that is. Should be a beautiful place. Instead, it's a house of horrors." Hayley shuddered.

"When you ran from his place, how did you get home?"

The girl smirked. "I used my considerable assets to hitch a ride."

Karina was at least able to tell Uri that he hadn't left any poor defenseless women in the hands of a serial killer that day.

"So, was that the last you ever saw him?"

"Yeah. Goodbye, Nate the Terrible."

"Okay, thank you for coming."

"No problem. Can I take one of your cards in case I ever need to hire you for something?" Hayley asked.

"Sure. Like what?"

"Well, I keep having to move and change jobs since I sort of have a stalker. I think he's a fan of my work, but I'm not amused that he shows up where I show up. Ya know what I mean?"

"Like where?"

"Mostly, he shows up in places where I dance when things get tight."

"Dance?" Karina asked. She couldn't picture Hayley in a tutu.

"When I say dance, I mean exotic dancing."

"Oh. Okay. Has he threatened you in any way?"

“No, but he is super creepy. And he tries to get my phone number. He follows me and tries to figure out where I live and work. I’m working at a new place, though, in another city, and I wear a wig now and I have a new stage name.”

“All of those things will help you to hide.” Karina handed her a card. “Call me if you see him again and need me to do some work for you to get him off your trail.”

“I will, honey. Thanks.”

Haley left and Karina sat there thinking about Nate and his sick fetishes of drinking the blood of animals while having sex. And then, mixing his… she didn’t want to even picture it in her head.

The bottom line was, Nate the Terrible was torturing poor defenseless animals to death. It was one thing to swiftly kill something and eat it while in wolf form. It was quite another to torment another living creature to death, slowly and painfully, for pleasure.

Karina went to the bathroom and washed her hands three times, as if by talking about it, she had gotten covered in blood. The mental picture of what Hayley had described was really bothering her.

Her phone rang.

“Hi, Jack,” she said. She was so glad to hear from him.

“Hi, Karina. How’s things going?”

“Honestly, humans are appalling. It’s been such a disgusting day that I feel like I need to take five showers.”

“Yep, same here,” he agreed. “We have a lot to discuss.”

“We sure do. Want to come to my office?” she asked.

“No, just come over to my place.” He said it in a way that she knew he wanted to do more than talk.

“Your place? I like the way you think, sir.”

“If you like the way I think, just imagine how much you’re going to like everything else we’re gonna do.”

“I’m down with that.”

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Chapter Fourteen

Karina lay naked in Jack's arms on his bed and listened as he told her about his night. When he was finished, she said, "I'm sorry. I know serial killers are not an appropriate after-sex topic for the bedroom, but I keep picturing you walking down Mountain Avenue wrapped in a cat-peed blanket yanked from a trash bin, and only wearing a pair of used, crunchy socks. It's putting a different spin on the gruesomeness of the whole thing." She paused. "I'm sorry if I giggled a bit."

"Not my finest hour as a dignified cop, that's for sure."

The younger man had, indeed, turned out to be Justin Browning's son, Mike. Mike was nineteen, and a medical student at USC who had begun to dabble in the art of killing pretty young women, mostly prostitutes, but he was not above snatching a student from his very workplace. In fact, he had written plans to do that soon.

Justin had realized this after his arrest for the crimes, but thinking his lawyer would get him off, at first, he hadn't told the police about his son. He did, however, roll over on his son, who then admitted he had one more body in Verdugo Park. His father had bought that Cherokee used, and had driven it there that night that Mike had met him. Mike was supposed to take the body to the ocean and get rid of it when the tide was going out. That was when Jack had come along.

Like father, like son. Two killers. It wasn't hard to figure out who had taught who.

With both men in custody, and out of his jurisdiction, Jack had sat at the Glendale Police Department all night, explaining his role in it, over and over. He'd said that he was in Glendale visiting his girlfriend's mother. He gave them Babushka's name and address, knowing she would back him up. He said he was waiting for his girlfriend, who he also named, and knew would back him up, to pick him up, so he went out for a walk in the park. He had seen the suspicious movements of Mike Browning, followed him and the rest was history.

"Why didn't he have any clothes on?" the detective asked him.

"I would assume to keep from leaving transfer evidence," Jack said.

"Mike Browning says you're wearing his clothes," the detective told him.

Jack laughed and said, "So, he said that *I* was naked, walking down Mountain Avenue and through Brand Park?"

The detective laughed, too. "Yeah, it was stupid. Of course you weren't. Where is your car, and your gun?"

"In Century City," Jack told him. "My partner, who was helping

me on the stakeout was down a car tonight. His wife had a thing, I guess. When he relieved me, I left my car. I was visiting an old lady, I didn't take my gun. I took the bus and walked the rest of the way."

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It was a long night before they got home, and the detective didn't believe him, but they had a sought-after serial killer in custody, and a bonus serial killer, too, so he didn't really care. It was more about getting the report right, he had told Jack.

Karina told Jack about the pack activities at the den. When she finished, he said, "What do you think Ivan is going to do, now that he knows Tatiana's a vampire, as well as a werewolf?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I'm worried, and so is Igor and the rest of the pack. I thought, if you don't mind, that we could all meet."

"Sure, we'll go over there in a while and join them all, but we'll be a little late," Jack said, "but for now, let's talk about us. Just you and me. No werewolf pack. No amazing grandmother who is a long-lost Russian princess. Nothing except you and me in this bed."

"Finally!" Karina smiled and rolled over on top of him. "Let's talk about us, again and again," she said, giving him a long, deep kiss. She felt Jack's hands on the small of her back and then, they moved over her shoulders.

He moved his kiss from her lips, down to her neck and shoulders.

Karina moaned and said, "Jack! Make me forget again that the rest of this gone-crazy world exists."

"My pleasure," Jack said as he felt a surge of adrenaline run through his veins. It was the same surge he had felt yesterday. He had come to think of it as the Alpha surge.

He smiled into her flesh as he realized that being an Alpha meant that he could make love over and over again, with seemingly no fatigue. Or loss of performance.

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Chapter Fifteen

Babushka's house was clean and shiny and as usual, she had quite a spread laid out on the dining room table. She glanced at the grandfather clock on the mantel, wondering what was delaying her guest.

Babushka had tea steaming in her best porcelain pot. She had arranged the fresh, warm homemade Russian tea cakes on tiny gold-rimmed porcelain plates. As she waited, she wondered if she should have told Karina to come over, too. They all had so much going on right now, though.

Karina had her work, and Jack had his. The rest of the pack was… well, unfortunately, Jack had hit it on the head that night. They were lazy, and just not all that bright, or motivated.

No, Babushka thought. *It was good that I kept this to myself. At least until I find out what she wants from me.* There was no reason to invite trouble.

Her doorbell rang and she went to answer it. When she opened the door, she looked at the beautiful young girl who looked so much like her family. She was holding a thick book in her hand that read, *Messenger of the Lord* on the cover, in Russian, of course.

Babushka took her hand and as she stepped inside, she said, "Welcome, Varvara. After all of our phone conversations about the Old Country, it's so good to finally meet you."

"It's so good to finally meet you, too. I have this gift for you." She put the big book on the living room coffee table. "Come and see it, Anastasia."

"You know my real name?"

"Princess Anastasia, I would know you anywhere."

Babushka was a little scared, but she sat next to her soft-spoken guest and lovingly touched the book on the coffee table.

"Can I open it?"

Varvara nodded and Babushka noticed the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Babushka asked.

"Everything's wrong. I'm sorry, so sorry. Please forgive me. They made me do this," Varvara said.

"Who are you talking about? Who are *they*?"

"My pack. My Alpha sent me."

Babushka shook her head in confusion. "What pack?"

"The Bolsheviks."

Babushka jumped up in alarm. "It's been almost a hundred years since I escaped them. What could they possibly want with me?"

"This." Varvara took a deep breath and with a trembling hand, she

reached over and opened the cover of the heavy book.

That was when the bomb went off.

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Chapter Sixteen

"Jack, we need to get going," Karina said. "The pack is likely waiting for us to start the meeting."

He sighed. "Can't we just stay in bed and make love all night, like normal people?"

"We aren't normal people. We're werewolves."

"Is that why every clandestine meeting has to be in the middle of the night?"

She laughed. "Pretty much."

He reluctantly got out of bed and gathered his clothing. "Aren't you getting up?"

"I will. I just love to watch you get dressed. And then, I play it back in my head in reverse. Sorry that I scratched up your back tonight."

He laughed. "I'm a werewolf. It'll heal fast. And it was worth it to hear you scream my name. So, did you like that wild lovemaking?"

She blushed a bit, but grinned. "With every molecule of me, I adored it."

He looked at her. "You're so wicked sometimes."

"That's why you love me."

He guffawed. "Not true. I love you for your goodness."

"Aww," she said, stretching out like a cat.

The doorbell rang a bunch of times and then, there was the sound of loud rapping on the front door.

"What on earth?" Karina said, startled. "Who could that be, knocking like that at this hour of the wolf?"

"That's a cop knock! It's the police, banging on the door with a nightstick. I would know that sound anywhere," Jack said. "Get dressed and I'll see what's up." He muttered a curse word and went, barefoot, to open the door and only wearing a pair of jeans still unbuttoned at the top button.

Karina called after him, "Nothing is ever good news when the police come in the middle of the night."

"You don't have to be a werewolf detective to know that," he replied.

She hurried to get dressed.

Jack walked in the dark because he could see in it. Who needed to turn on lamps when you were a werewolf? He looked through the peephole and recognized some old co-workers from the police department. He opened the door. "Hello, men in black. What's going on?"

"We need to come in," one of them said gruffly.

Jack nodded and opened the door, showed them to the living

room and turned on lights as he went.

"Have a seat, gentlemen."

"Jack. Is Karina Nosova here?"

"Yes, Tyrone, she is." He called, "Karina?"

Karina came out, wearing a fluffy pink bathrobe over pajamas printed with a wolf pattern. Clothes that she kept at his place.

She cut right to the chase and sat on the arm of the big chair where Jack sat. "What's going on? What's happened?"

The cops sat opposite them, two grim-faced guys sitting uneasily on the couch. "First, before we tell you, we need to know your whereabouts tonight."

"In bed," they both said at the same time.

"Asleep?" the other one asked. His name was Adam Rice.

"No, as a matter of fact," Karina said. "If you must know, we haven't slept yet."

They looked at each other and nodded. Apparently, believing them.

"Guys, what's happened?" Jack asked.

"We are sorry to have to tell you this, Miss Nosova, but we think your grandmother may have been killed tonight."

Karina gasped and tears came to her eyes. "No, that's impossible!"

"It could be her. I'm afraid we need you to come to the morgue and identify a body that we think is hers."

"No, this can't be right. It's a mistake. She can't die!"

The cops exchanged looks. "Everyone dies eventually," Tyrone said.

"You're wrong." Karina reached for her phone and called her grandmother. "It went right to voicemail," she said, clutching Jack's arm fearfully. "That never happens."

"Miss Nosova, we're fairly sure it's your grandmother who was killed. And another victim that we can't yet identify."

"What happened?" Jack asked. "I want details. Right now!"

"Someone gave her a bomb in what looks like was a hollowed-out book. When she opened it, it detonated and shot some sort of silver-colored shrapnel into her and into the other woman. Hell, it might even be silver. We don't yet know who the bomber is, or if she was aware that the book was, indeed, a bomb."

"Silver in a bomb?" Karina echoed.

"We think so. Yes, ma'am. It's the weirdest thing we've ever seen in a homemade bomb. A bomb filled with silver shards. It was also incendiary, perhaps to conceal evidence. So, the living room looks pretty much like it was fire-bombed, as well as the shrapnel."

Karina broke into wrenching sobs and Jack felt tears rising to his eyes, too, as he watched Karina's world crumble. *Babushka murdered?*

After everything she had survived in the last hundred years to now? It was inconceivable. And yet, there it was.

"I don't believe you!" Karina said, her voice rising.

"Her living room is destroyed." The cop got out his cell phone and scrolled through it. "I won't show you what's left of her. But here's what's left of the living room. Not much."

One officer got up and showed Karina a cell phone photo of the destroyed room.

She screamed when she saw the china teapot on the floor and blood everywhere on the scorched antique carpet.

"I'm so sorry." He turned off his phone. The cops both sat on the couch again, watching Karina cry as she fell into Jack. He held her to his chest and wordlessly stroked her back and hair.

"Miss Nosova, who would want to hurt your grandmother?" Officer Tyrone asked.

She shook her head. "No one! Everyone loved her. She was a pillar of the Russian-American community. She didn't have a mean bone in her body. She helped everyone."

"It's true," Jack said. "She was like a grandmother to many immigrants."

"Immigrants? Legal ones?"

"I never asked people for their citizenship status," Karina said. "You can interview our friends. They all live in a house together."

"Oh, we've been to that smelly flophouse where the artist gave shelter to various randoms?"

Karina's back stiffened. "Being poor doesn't make people criminals. They live there as a… family." She couldn't say *werewolf pack*.

The cops exchanged a grim look. "We've been to the house, Miss Nosova. They're gone."

"Gone? Maybe they're just out for the evening. They like to go for a run at night."

"Miss Nosova, the house is empty of possessions. They're gone. Looks like they left in a big hurry, too. The house is stripped, even of food."

Both cops nodded at her.

She sobbed some more. "I don't understand. What do you mean, they're gone? They can't be gone."

"Clothes, artwork, everything is gone but the trash they left behind. The landlord is going to have to hire a cleaning crew."

"Did you find any paintings? Ivan was an artist."

"No, nothing like that."

"If the paintings are gone, they are truly gone, then," Karina said.

Even Jack's mouth dropped open. "Let me call Ivan." He grabbed

his phone and called Ivan's number. After a few moments, he said, "I got a message that the number's no longer in service."

"Ivan? Gone? I've known him since I was ten years old! We're close friends!" Karina cried out.

"Let us ask you again, Miss Nosova. We don't know who did this. Not yet. But we need your help. I'm sorry for your grief, but who would want to kill your grandmother? Maybe not from the U.S., but from where she came from. Does she have any enemies back home?"

Karina bit her lip until it bled and shook her head.

"Tell them, Karina. If you know something, tell them."

"Only the Bolsheviks hated her!" she blurted.

"Bolsheviks? Wait a minute. Like in history class? The Russian Revolution that dismantled the Tsarist aristocracy?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"That was almost a hundred years ago."

"Yes, and my grandmother was over a hundred years old."

"Oh, come on," Tyrone said.

"She was!" Karina cried bitterly. "And the Bolsheviks were her old enemies."

"But they're all dead."

"Their kin keep up the vendetta. It has to be them. Everyone else loves her!"

"But why her? Why a poor old immigrant woman? Why target her with a bomb?" Tyrone asked.

"Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova was the youngest daughter of the Russian Tsar Nicholas II, the last sovereign of Imperial Russia. And she was my grandmother."

Jack face-palmed himself.

"You knew about this royal claim, Jack?" one of the cops asked.

He nodded. "I know that's who she *thought* she was. What's the harm in letting an old lady believe she's Princess Anastasia? Heck, there have been many people who said the same thing. I had no proof either way. I just loved her for herself."

"I have proof," Karina said. "Our DNA can be traced, if necessary. I mean, to see if I am related to the dead person."

The cops exchanged looks. "We need you both to come to the morgue. Right now."

"We'll get dressed," Jack said.

Karina was crying hysterically. It was all Jack could do to get her in the car. She did not want to identify her grandmother's body. But in the end, she had to.

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It took only seconds for Karina to scream that it was her grandmother splayed on the steel table with a toe tag that was waiting to be filled out.

Afterward, still weeping in the morgue lobby, suddenly, Karina gasped in pain and gripped her lower abdomen as a red stain like spilled merlot soaked through her jeans and brought her to her knees in agony.

“Oh, my God,” Jack said. “What’s going on, Karina?”

“I don’t know,” Karina said, just before she passed out. Jack caught her and he lowered her gently to the floor.

“Somebody call an ambulance!” Jack shouted and shoved his hand down her jeans to press down hard on the artery in her groin and stop this horrible thing from happening to his one true love.

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Chapter Seventeen

Karina saw bright lights and felt jabs in her arm and, through a metal-tasting anesthetic, was aware of a painful scraping of her insides. “No!” she cried, realizing what was happening and then, a mask was shoved over her mouth and nose and she knew no more. Not until she woke up in pain and with IVs in her arms. One had clear liquid in it and the other had blood flowing into her. Not that werewolves couldn’t heal themselves, but she would have a hard time explaining that to medical personnel.

She saw the worried face of her lover in the corner of her vision and opened her eyes wider.

“Jack,” she thought she shouted, but it came out as a hoarse whisper.

“I’m here, sweetheart. I haven’t left your side, except when they kicked me out of the operating room for the D & C. I’m so sorry they had to do that to you. I’m so sorry.”

“Did I have a… miscarriage?” she asked, puzzled.

“Yes.” He paused. “Did you even know you were pregnant?”

She shook her head. “No. I had no idea. I thought I gained about ten pounds, but you know, women’s weight fluctuates all the time.”

“I’m so sorry, my Karina.” He sighed heavily and she could see that he had been crying. A lot.

Karina said quietly, “I lost two loved ones in a few hours.”

He nodded. “I’m so sorry about your grandmother. And him, too.”

“A baby boy? He was a boy?”

“Yes. A boy.” His voice was full of grief and she reached out for his hands and found them.

“How far along was I?”

“About four months.”

Her breath went out of her. “Four months? How could I have not known?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t know either. I just thought you looked more beautiful to me every day. As always.”

She swallowed, hard. “Such a loss. Your beautiful child.”

“Our beautiful child,” he said.

“Can I ever conceive again?”

“Yes. They said you could. The doctor already told you things, but you were out of it, so I listened so I could tell you what he said.”

A moan escaped her. “Get me out of here, Jack. I want to heal on my own without all of this fog of painkillers and blood units that I don’t want or need.”

“They said you almost bled to death.”

“I wouldn’t have died. I’m a werewolf. I can make more blood

quickly."

"They don't know that. And you can't tell them."

She nodded. "It was a shock to see my grandmother like that. In the morgue."

"The shock probably caused the miscarriage, they said." Jack continued, "Had I known it would have been so gruesome, I would have not allowed them to force you to identify her. I didn't know her face was nearly destroyed."

"No, Jack. I had to see her for myself. I had to see her to believe that Babushka was really dead."

"I'm sorry you had to see."

"Me, too. I'm so sorry she's dead. And that our baby is lost."

He nodded.

"Are we in trouble with the cops over the bombing?"

"No. And we aren't dealing with the local cops anymore. It's federal now."

"Federal? Oh, no. Because I said it was the Bolsheviks who likely killed her?"

"Yes. They're checking that out. Thoroughly."

"Did I do the right thing, Jack? To tell them the truth? Even the fact that Babushka was Princess Anastasia?"

He took in a deep breath and let it out. "There's no going back on that confession now. And, there *is* this old saying that the truth shall set you free." He paused. "I think that may be more than a little prophetic."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You rest now, Karina. I have to go do something really important, but I'll be back later."

"What are you up to?"

"I can't tell you yet. Just know that you're perfectly safe here. There's an armed cop outside your room. Actually, a federal agent. Nobody except for me and medical personnel who properly identify themselves can get in or out of your room."

"Does my guard have silver bullets in his gun?" Karina blurted. "For the Bolshevik werewolves?"

"Actually, yes. He is fully loaded with silver bullets."

"Oh, my God, the feds know we're werewolves? We're going to be vivisected!"

"Karina, stop it. These are the good guys. And he's not going to tell."

"How do you know that, Jack? How do you know he won't betray us?"

"Because he's a werewolf, too."

Her mouth dropped open. "A federal agent werewolf? Are you

sure?"

"Yeah, he's a born werewolf. He changed for me and changed back to prove it. The feds have a whole division for paranormal creatures and werewolves is just one of the departments."

She breathed easier. "Will you stay with me? Just until I fall asleep?"

He nodded and held her hand. "I'm so sorry about the baby."

"Me, too," she whispered.

Jack caressed her cheek. "Do you know I love you with all my heart?"

"I know that more than ever." She paused. "Just get me out of this place, Jack."

"I think you might be released tomorrow if your blood pressure comes up to normal."

"I'll work on that," she said.

"Sleep, Karina." He pointed toward a gadget connected to her IV. "That's a self-pump for pain."

"Screw that. I am a werewolf. A Russian werewolf. The worst pain is in my heart, not my body."

He nodded and stroked her hand.

She yawned. "How can I be tired? I just woke up!"

"You've been through a lot."

Something occurred to Karina. "You're going to look for Ivan, aren't you? To see if he's a Bolshevik?"

"The thought did occur to me. And it looks pretty bad that the entire pack disappeared."

"That's very telling all right," Karina said. "I just don't want to believe that Ivan betrayed Babushka."

"Nobody wants to believe that."

Tears came to her eyes again. "Ivan would never betray *me*."

"Don't be too sure about that," Jack said.

"Don't kill him, Jack," Karina begged.

"You let me worry about Ivan. Your sole job right now is to get well."

"I'll be fine," Karina said. "When a werewolf loses a baby, it's because something was wrong. Babushka always told me that."

"Something was wrong with our son?"

"Yes. Or it was not safe to be born."

"Not safe to be born?" Jack said. "I never heard that."

"That was what Babushka taught me, growing up, that if a werewolf mother's life was in constant danger, she could conceive, but she would never carry to full term. It could be an old wives' tale, but who knew the mysteries of werewolves better than Babushka?"

"She knew a lot," Jack said. "I loved her, too, and am feeling the

loss of her. I'm distraught, too, but trying to be the Alpha, the strong one."

"I know you are, Jack," Karina whispered. "Good job."

"Thanks. I have to go do some important things, my sweet Karina. If you sleep, before you know it, I'll be back again, bothering you for sex."

She smiled sadly, knowing that Jack would let her decide when it was time to come together again. "I just wish you could stay here with me."

"I have to do things tonight, Karina."

"Tell me what you're up to."

"Not now. You let me worry about the hard stuff."

"Oh, no. You're going out to do something dangerous."

"I'm going to try to avoid that, believe me."

He kissed her lips and she tasted his tears on them. Tears of loss for a son he would never know. Tears for Babushka. Tears for her. And maybe, just maybe, tears for Ivan, wherever he was.

"Don't kill Ivan," she pleaded. "He isn't the one who killed Babushka."

"Shhh. Sleep."

She winced in pain. Her private parts were killing her. He handed her the pain medication device with the button on it. "Don't let your pride make you suffer. Press the button, Karina. There's not enough morphine in the world for all you've been through in the last few hours."

"Could I accidentally overdose?" she worried.

"No. It's on a timer and only allows so much per squirt and per hour. It's completely metered."

She trusted Jack. And so, she pressed the button.

She suddenly felt as if she were falling…

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Chapter Eighteen

"Karina?" She heard a familiar voice, but it wasn't Jack's.

She opened her eyes and the room was completely dark, but of course, she had good night vision.

She sat up in bed and cried out from pain. She smelled him and knew who he was.

"Ivan? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, my God, Karina. I'm so sorry. So sorry."

"How did you get past the armed federal agent in the hallway outside my door?"

"I used some mountain-climbing equipment and rappelled down from the roof and came in through the window. I had to quietly break the latch."

"You took a horrible chance, coming here like this."

"I know, but I had to see you. I had to explain."

"Explain what?" Karina trembled. This was it. The moment she dreaded.

"Explain what happened to your grandmother."

"Who killed her? You?"

"No! The Bolshevik werewolves. I trusted them when I integrated them into our pack, but I had no idea who they were or what their motive was for blending with our pack. I didn't know they were part of the faction looking for the last-known survivors of the Romanovs, to exterminate them."

She digested that for several moments. "The Danilov pack that joined ours were the Bolsheviks that killed my grandmother?"

"Yes, I'm so sorry, Karina. If I would have known, I would have killed them all the moment they set foot in America. But I didn't know and I welcomed them into my house, and my life. I fed them and clothed them and supported all of their lazy non-working asses with my art and out of the goodness of my heart. I tried to make them into decent members of Russian-American society, but they were not just worthless. They were *ruthless*. Even willing to sacrifice one of their own. The girl with the bomb was coerced into doing it. She was weak and a tool of their evil agenda. I doubt she wanted to do it. I can't even imagine what they threatened her with. Probably hurting one of her relatives back in the Old Country."

Karina wept. "I trusted them, too, and so did Babushka. She had them in her house!"

"I know. They are the ones who betrayed me and distracted me from protecting you and Babushka with their successful conspiracy to kidnap my wife and son."

"Your son! Where is he, Ivan?"

“He’s dead, Karina. They killed him! They killed my baby!” he said hoarsely.

“Oh, no. Why? Why would they do that to an innocent baby?”

“He was going to be a rival Alpha to their plans for a resurgence of the Danilov pack in America and the Bolsheviks in America. So, they got my son out of the way, early. He never had a chance.”

“Oh, my God. Are you sure?”

“I found him in the basement of the pack house and I buried him.”

Karina started crying again. “I am so sorry. So sorry. We have both lost our sons today.”

“I know. I’m sorry for you, too, Karina.”

“Ivan, come here.”

He came closer and she saw the grief and agony written on his face.

“Where is your wife? Where is Tatiana?”

“I don’t know if she’s dead or alive. Despite the fact that she is a vampire and a werewolf, I will search the Earth for the rest of my days to find her and free her from wherever they have her. My quest for finding her is the only thing that is keeping me alive at this point. She must be out of her mind without Abram.”

“So, they lied about vampires who turned into bats and they lied about kidnapping your wife and son? And they lied about Tatiana going with her captors willingly?”

“Yes, and to my great regret, I killed some vampires. And now, there is a price on my head from the vampires—vampires who have their own werewolf hunters.”

Karina gasped. “You’ve unleashed the old guard then, the ones who made sure that vampires and werewolves would never marry or mix, even as friends and allies?”

“Yes. The vampires had no part in the kidnapping. I just took the word of the lying Danilov pack and started killing vampires, just for being vampires. I killed a lot of them indiscriminately.”

“Ivan, no! How could you?”

“I had murder in my heart. Rage. Frustration. I unleashed my worst werewolf side and I annihilated a bunch of them.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know. Twenty?”

“Ivan. This is horrendous!”

“I know it is. Now, I not only have the Danilov pack after me, but the vampires, too. This is the last time you will ever see me, because from now on, Karina, I need to stay in the shadows.”

“Are the vampires going to kill me, too?” Karina asked, fearful.

“No. Their quarrel is with me alone.”

“What about the Danilov pack?”

“Yes, if the Bolshevik werewolves find you and you are vulnerable and alone, without your Alpha near you, you will be killed very slowly and painfully. You are the last of the Romanovs. They want you dead.”

“No, my son was the last of the Romanovs. My son was the very last of them.”

“I’m so sorry you lost him. They did that to him, you know.”

“No, Ivan, it was a miscarriage. An accident of nature.”

“I tortured it out of one of them.”

“Who?”

“Ela.”

“Ela? After we helped her so much?”

“She’s with them. And they killed your baby.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“They put some abortifacient herbs in your food in your refrigerator. In a rosemary beef stew you’d made. It caused your miscarriage.”

Then Karina really did weep, great gulping sobs of agony.

“Did you kill Ela?”

“No, Igor came for her and we fought and she got away.”

“How did they know I was pregnant?”

“Your eyes. A very bright green. But only when you are in your wolf form. You couldn’t even have known, unless you caught your reflection in a lake or something.”

Her mouth was open in shock. “Where is Igor in all this? And why is he not standing with you?” Karina asked, through her tears and gasping sobs.

“He has never forgiven me for becoming the Alpha of our pack. He stands now with, and is loyal to, the Bolshevik werewolves.”

Karina screamed, “No!”

“Yes.”

“Why did he betray you?”

“Because he thought he could become their Alpha. And he probably will. A more sorry group of werewolves I have never encountered. It would be easy for Igor to battle for Alpha among that ragtag group of misfits.”

“Your own brother not only betrayed the pack and you, but conspired to kill my child?”

“Yes. In the end, when we were fighting, I could not bear to kill him, Karina. He was once my womb mate, my best friend.”

“So, you let him go?” she said in disbelief.

“I had to. He is my identical twin!”

She put her hand over her mouth and cried her heart out.

Ivan came to the bed and gave Karina a long hug. “I would have

never let them hurt you, had I known. I loved you once."

"You still do," she said flatly.

"You are always going to be my first love, the one who got away."

"And mine, long ago. Not now."

"If not for that werewolf hunter, that night, when you got shot, we would have been married a long time ago."

"That was then. This is now. I love Jack. He is my very heart now, Ivan."

"I know that. Oh, how well I know that. The jealousy kills me."

"Well, shove it down and find Tatiana. Your wife! Go into the shadows, the places where evil goes and *find* her."

"Believe me. At this point, she is the only thing that keeps me from putting a silver knife in my own heart."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. If I find her dead, then I shall hastily go and meet her on the other side. And gladly."

"Ivan, you mustn't do that or say that. Not ever."

"I will do what I must. I am, after all, a Russian werewolf. We go out in a blaze of tragedy, if not glory. It's our fate, I think."

"I don't believe that. Is there any way you can straighten all this out?"

"No, I am haunted and hunted, vile and reviled. Lost and loathed. I am a murderer of innocent vampires and an unwitting accomplice to the Danilov pack of merciless Bolsheviks." He gulped. "What I must do now, is slip away and find my Tatiana and heal her from what I am sure they have done to her, and live in obscurity with her ever after. There will be no more children of my loins. I cannot perpetuate this by bringing more of my blood descendants into this horrible fight with the Bolsheviks."

"Oh, Ivan!" She was fraught with so much loss, she felt as if her chest was caving in with grief. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Weep not for me. We had our chance at happiness and it was taken from us by a werewolf hunter."

"Yes. It was."

"We shall never see each other again, Karina."

She nodded. "It's for the best. I shall miss you, Ivan. You and I were once so close to happiness."

"You'll find that with Jack in a purer way. He is goodness and I am darkness."

Karina couldn't say anything now. She was too choked up with tears.

As he went toward the window and grabbed the rappelling rope that hung there and clipped onto it, and then onto the harness he wore, he looked back at Karina, his eyes full of tears.

“Whatever you do, don’t go to Russia.”

“I know better than that.” She whispered, “Godspeed, Ivan.”

And then, he was gone.

Her emotional pain was so great that she pumped her pain-medicine device until she again fell into a deep sleep.

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Chapter Nineteen

"Come away with me," said a familiar voice.

Karina opened her eyes to daylight and saw that Jack was packing her few belongings from the hospital room closet into her backpack. He must have gone to her apartment, too, to get the backpack. "Where are we going? To my grandmother's house?"

"No, it's being repaired, but it's not safe there. And you couldn't bear it there, Karina."

She nodded. "So, we're going to your place?"

"No. We're going to *our* place."

"Our place? We don't have a place together."

"Yes, we do. All night, I've been working on some things behind the scenes."

"Like what?"

"I'll just cut to the chase. We're leaving California."

"*We* are? I wasn't consulted in this decision. I have a life here, a business, a P.I. license, and a career that I worked very hard to build."

"There wasn't time to consult you. There *isn't* time. We have to leave, Karina. We have to go into hiding. If you ever want to have a normal life, a safe life, you have to break away from every single werewolf pack."

"So, you're going full-blown Alpha and you want to start your own wolf pack?"

"Not a pack. A family of two, and maybe later, kids, if you want them, too. No other werewolf packs. No werewolf pack rituals. No werewolf pecking order or social hierarchy. Just one man and one woman who love each other, going off into the sunset together. To live and prosper."

She smiled sadly. "You do know this is totally Alpha of you to be this bossy?"

"Whatever. I am a *man* and I am taking control of the safety of *us*."

She smiled. He *was* totally Alpha now. There was no going back.

"What if I say no?" Karina said.

"Then, wherever you go, I will go, too. Just know that to stay here is a death sentence."

"I know that much is true. Ivan was here last night."

"What? How did he get in?"

"The window. He rappelled down from the roof. His child is dead."

"Oh, no. How?"

"The Danilov pack. He said that they and Igor are with the Bolsheviks and that they put—"

She was about to tell them about how she had lost their child

when there was a tap on the hospital room door.

Jack went to the door and asked who it was. It was her doctor and a federal agent was with him. Jack unlocked the door and let them both in past the guard at the door.

Her doctor came in briefly, looked at her chart, and told her she was being released as soon as the paperwork went through the channels. He had put things in motion and in the next hour, someone would be bringing a wheelchair for her.

Karina said, “I prefer to walk out of here.”

“That’s the spirit,” her doctor said. She thanked him for taking good care of her and he left the room.

Leon looked at Jack. “Did you tell her yet?”

“I was just about to.”

“Tell me what?” Karina asked.

Jack nodded at the agent. “Go for it, Leon. By the way, Karina, this is Leon Petrillo, U.S. Marshal. Leon, this is Katrina.”

“Nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard so much about you from Jack.” He paused. “So, you and Jack have officially been accepted into the federal Witness Security Program or WITSEC. We’ve prepared new identities for you both, and you will be relocated to a place that’s quite safe from the *Bratva* and their ilk, or as you call them, the Bolsheviks.”

“So, you believed me about them?” Karina said.

“Of course. *Bratva* and its various Russian mafia factions number, globally, somewhere around 300,000 members.”

Karina nodded. “I know.”

Leon said, “The threat to you both, if you stay in California, is imminent.”

“But my grandmother’s house? My apartment? My office?” Karina said. “I even have a new P.I. case. I can’t just flee my entire life.”

“We recommend that you do exactly that. Immediately.”

“It seems overwhelming right now. I want to go home and rest, process all that has happened. Make informed and careful decisions.”

“They were made for you. Jack and I took care of the preparations. Everything of yours, your grandmother’s and Jack’s is already packed up, shipped, and will be waiting for you in your new home. As well, your grandmother’s house has been sold and the money deposited in your new bank account, Karina.”

“What? All that? Does this witness protection provided to us mean that Jack and I will have to testify at some point?”

“You may be asked to provide intel as the case develops. And you may be called to testify once the suspects are in custody.”

“We’ll help.” A tear escaped her eye. Her old life, as she once knew it, was completely gone. “Where are Jack and I going?”

“To a place that we have deemed fairly safe, a place with a low *Bratva* presence: Arizona.”

“What are we going to do there?”

“You’ll live, Karina. You’ll live.”

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Chapter Twenty

Two months later…

Wearing a white bikini, and with her newly blonde hair twisted up in a bun, Karina sat at a concrete patio table in the shade of the gazebo next to their swimming pool in Gold Canyon, Arizona, about forty miles east of Phoenix. Their back yard had a view of the rugged Superstition Mountains. Just to the right of the mountains were miles and miles of rolling valley filled with cactus and scrub, and probably quite a few rattlesnakes, as far as the eye could see. Somewhere out there was the Lost Dutchman's gold. *Or not.* In any case, it was a magnificent view of a desert morning that was opening like a pink and orange cactus bloom.

But Karina wasn't admiring the sweeping mountain view from the back yard of their beautiful house.

Instead, she tapped on her laptop keyboard as she gathered intel on the *Bratva* presence in the U.S. and abroad. She had another screen open, too, and was mulling over the FBI's most wanted criminals list. Especially criminals with bounties on their heads. Especially one Phoenix criminal.

Also dressed for swimming in a pair of faded blue jean cut-offs that showed off his tan, Jack came out of their Southwest-style home, bearing a tray with two plates of *huevos rancheros* and glasses of orange juice squeezed from fruit from their own orange trees. Over ice. "Breakfast is served, milady."

"Looks great. I'm glad we're eating now instead of later. Did you know it's supposed to be 115 degrees today?"

"Welcome to Arizona. And it's only mid-June," he quipped.

"That's why I'm glad we get up early," Karina replied. She dug into the spicy eggs and beans and moaned her appreciation. She sipped the juice and licked her lips. "There's nothing like having a partner who can really cook and he juices, too," she said.

"There's nothing like having a partner who can catch criminals," he bantered back.

She smiled. "You do that, too. Partner."

"And to think that WITSEC suggested that we run a coffee shop to keep a low profile."

"No way were we going to do that. I wasn't going to give up my investigation career," she said.

"Neither was I. Law enforcement has been in my blood for way too long to switch out my lifework for something new. It's who I am."

"Certainly is. And ditto."

Jack added, "I suppose we'll think ourselves foolish if *Bratva*

catches up with us and starts torturing us to see how much we know about their operations. Then we'll wish we were just making a living by creating fancy coffee drinks for millennials."

"It's worth the risk," she said. "We gotta do some good in the world and take down these very bad guys."

"I agree. *Bratva* is very entrenched in Miami and quietly infiltrating the rest of the states."

"But not so quietly, in the case of what they did to my grandmother."

"Those sickos. Fire-bombing an old woman and throwing silver shrapnel into her…"

"She was an old werewolf princess from the Tsar's family. She was always hiding and I now understand why she felt that the battle with the Bolsheviks was never going to be over."

"Werewolves live for a long time, forever, if no one kills them. But dissidents? They just keep making more of them." He stroked her hair. "I'm so sorry about Babushka. She should have lived forever."

Karina nodded somberly. "We'll get those Bolsheviks, the *Bratva*. We *have* to get them. For Babushka. And for the rest of my family and others who've died. It's a stark realization that I'm the last of the Romanovs of my grandmother's royal line."

"I know, and I'm so sorry," he said. "Did you recently read that article where Russian—"

She interrupted him. "Propaganda is a trick to flush us out, round us up and kill us, the last scattered, living vestiges of a time gone by. Anyway, there's no way I'm ever setting foot in the Old Country again. It's far too dangerous and those guys play for keeps."

"Agreed," Jack said. "And we don't need to add that cat-and-mouse game with *Bratva* to our lives."

"Who is the cat and who is the mouse, though?" Karina said.

"Indeed." He paused. "Leon says they've never lost anyone in the WITSEC program."

"Let's keep it that way. At this point, I'm just doing some digging online. That's all, Jack, so don't nag me about working on Babushka's murder case."

Jack drummed his fingers on the table for a moment.

"What's on your mind?"

"You know that Leon doesn't want us actively working on Babushka's murder. It could attract *Bratva* right to us if we get directly involved in the ongoing investigation and we start getting close. It's too risky and WITSEC has set us up here with a sweet new life. We have to really do what they told us and fly under the radar."

"I'm just doing Internet research on the Russian mafia," she said again.

“It was like pulling teeth to try to get Leon to let us even become bounty hunters. I thought you were going to get us our first case here in the great state of Arizona.”

She switched screens. “I did. I found us a nice easy-peasy case. Come and look.”

Jack came to her side of the table and looked at her laptop screen. “The FBI Most Wanted list is your idea of easy-peasy bounty hunts?”

“He will be.” She pointed to a mugshot of an ordinary-looking guy. “Here’s our quarry.”

He read the details on the page and said, “Armed robber of an armored truck at a movie theater and first-degree murderer in Phoenix in 2004. Unlawful flight. Looks like he could be a college professor. Clean-shaven, an attractive guy, I suppose, as guys go. Not an eyebrow hair out of place. Might I say, he’s kind of fastidious about his appearance?”

“Yeah, he’s a pretty nondescript middle-class sort of guy, except for that new scar on his neck in that old photo.”

“What kind of scar is that, do you think?” Jack asked.

“I’m glad you brought that up. To me, it looks surgical, not like the result of an accident of some kind. Hey, did you notice the FBI bounty amount on the perp?”

“A hundred grand?” Jack whistled.

They looked at each other and she grinned.

“The money’s great, but what makes you think we can find this guy after more than twelve years? And what makes you think he’s still in the Phoenix area?”

“First, take a long look at the eyes and that nose. And that neck scar.”

He did and stored a mental image. “Okay. Got a face snapshot in my head now. You gonna show me something else?”

“You know me well.” Karina minimized the window and next showed Jack a video on a news channel’s site.

“What am I watching, babe? Some overly tanned woman winning a bicycle race for charity in Phoenix earlier today? How does this tie in?”

“Hang on. Let me do a screen grab of the face of the race winner and I’ll put it next to the older FBI wanted mugshot.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding.”

“I’m not. Hang on. Just look, Jack, and tell me if you see what I see.”

When she did place the faces side by side, Jack’s mouth fell open. “What the hell? She’s him! I mean, he’s her. She’s got the same eyes, albeit with eyeliner and mascara and now, a very faint scar on the neck, but in the same place as the one on the mug shot.”

“I think it’s a tracheal shave surgical scar,” Karina said. “You’ll notice there have been some changes, such as breast implants, a nose job, lip enhancement, and so on. But look at the eyebrows. They’re the same, even plucked the same way.”

“Sooo…” Jack said, “I assume he was starting to undergo a transgender thing, back when he robbed the armored truck, and then, maybe he used the money to continue the medical process of turning himself into a woman?”

“That would be my assumption, too. It could be the motive for the armed robbery. I would almost be willing to bet the perp never did a crime like that again. Maybe just used the money to set up getting the work done for the transformation to female and to start a new life as a woman. And win bicycle races and go out in public like a regular decent citizen.”

“No wonder the FBI never found the guy.”

Karina nodded. “They were looking for a man on the run, not a woman who was hiding in plain sight.”

“How did you figure it out?”

“I was on the FBI site looking for someone local to hunt down for the bounty and I was curious about what might have caused the neck scar of our Phoenix criminal. So, I just started looking at images of neck scars on a Google image search. There are several operations, such as thyroid cancer surgery and surgery on the cervical part of the spine that they do through the neck. Both of those could cause neck scars that look like that, but when one of the Google image searches turned up ‘tracheal shave scar,’ I had a hunch that I was on the right track, a track that the FBI has probably never taken.”

“Who would have thought to wonder what caused the scar on his neck?”

“I would and I did. I learned from the best.”

“Thank you,” Jack said.

“Um, I was talking about Babushka, the most curious woman who ever lived.”

“Oh.”

“You know I am a rabid news junkie like my grandmother. I just have to check out all the local news sites every day so I can get to know our new, massive area of metro Phoenix and get the lay of the land. When I was watching the clip of the bicycle race, I saw a potential match with the murder-robbery perp on the FBI Most Wanted page. And my werewolf-savvy brain kind of went: ding-ding-ding! Because as you know, things and people aren’t always what they appear.”

“Like us, you mean. Werewolves.” Jack smiled. “You’re a fantastic detective.”

“Yes, yes, I am.” She paused. “And by the way, people can mask their true eye color with contact lenses, and the appearance of the shape of their eyes with plastic surgery or shape-tape, but our perp didn’t feel the need to do that. I certainly recognized the eyes, though she’s had a chin job and maybe the jawline is thinner from dieting or surgery.”

Jack said, “Let’s run the two pictures through a facial recognition tool and see if they are indeed the same person.”

“Great idea. Why didn’t I think of that when I was searching for a photo of someone who looked like the FBI mug shot?”

“That’s why you have me, the voice of reason and methodical investigations,” Jack said. “Not hunches.”

“Hunches work, too.” She loaded both images on a comparison site. In a few seconds she said, “The Pictriev tool says the two photos are a 75 percent match.”

“Wow, apparently, hunches do work. So, do we know the fake name of this winner of the bicycle race for charity?”

“We do.” Karina tapped her keyboard to read the news story under the video and said, “Janie Della Bates won first place in today’s bicycle race and contributed $500 in pledges to help vaccinate the wild horses on the Salt River against equine fever.”

“Same initials even. What a dumbass,” Jack said.

“Yeah, we probably aren’t dealing with a brilliant serial criminal, well, hopefully not. Because we need to catch this murderer and armed robber.”

Karina did some more typing. “According to the news report, she owns a custom bicycle shop. Hang on, I’ll try to find it on the Arizona Corporation Commission website.”

Jack pulled his chair closer so he could see.

“Got it,” Karina said, “Janie’s Bike Shop is in Scottsdale. Effective date of the business is eighteen months after the robbery and murder.”

“Probably ‘Janie’ laid low while she was getting all of the surgeries.”

“That’s what I figured, too. I just sent the business address and info to the printer inside,” Karina said. “I suppose we should finish our *al fresco* breakfast by the pool, put on some clothes, go pick up the perp and deliver her to the FBI.”

“And invoice the FBI for our reward money?” Jack snapped his fingers. “Easy as all that?”

“Yeah, and then, we’ll come back here and cool off by the pool in plenty of time before the full moon rises and we go for our monthly werewolf run in the Superstition Mountains.”

“Sounds like an amazing day and night that you have planned, but bounty hunting in Arizona can’t be that easy,” he said.

“We’re two werewolves. I’m sure we can take down an exhausted human bicycle racer. And I’m sure I will like this bounty hunter gig a lot better than running a coffee shop.”

“As the old country song says, ‘Don’t count your money till the dealing’s done,’” Jack replied.

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Chapter Twenty-one

Now parked outside Janie's Bike Shop in Scottsdale, Karina and Jack were disappointed by a sign in the window: *Closed for Race Day! Back Sunday.*

"Dang it," Jack said.

"Now what?" Karina asked. "This was supposed to be easy. I don't want to sit here and burn up gasoline to run the car air conditioner on a long surveil."

"It's not likely she'll come here after the race, is it?"

"Maybe we can get her to come to the shop on some pretense," she suggested.

"How? I don't want to spook her and make her run."

"There's a card in the window with a number to call for an emergency," Karina suggested.

"Let's do a reverse lookup of that phone number," Jack said.

"I'm on it," Karina said, turning on her laptop and plugging it in as the car air conditioner blasted them. "Hmm, it's a security company emergency service for businesses."

"Let's not call it," he said.

"Agreed."

Karina said, "I'm going to find the Facebook page for the bicycle race event to see if there is an after-race get-together, like a picnic or something." After a moment, she looked up from her laptop. "They're having a barbeque in an hour at Red Mountain Park in a reserved ramada by the fishing dock."

"You're brilliant, as always."

"Thanks. I can't see the winner of the race missing that party."

"Neither can I," he said. "Which way?"

"East, between here and home on Brown Road. I'll get Google Maps on my phone with voice directions until we get a better lay of the land of the sprawling Valley of the Sun."

She rummaged in the back seat and pulled out their T-shirts that read, "Fugitive Recovery Agent" on the back and front. At a stoplight, they put them on over their clothes. She also got their shields out of the glove compartment and hung them around their necks.

While he drove toward Red Mountain Park, she said, "Want me to call the FBI and give them a heads-up?"

"Not yet. I don't want them stealing the collar from us."

"Good point."

"Are you excited?" he asked.

"Tackling and apprehending a dangerous cold-case criminal excites me. But a hundred thousand dollars bounty excites me even more. It means more freedom for us, in case we have to run again."

“Don’t say that, Karina. We’re just getting settled into our new house. Just starting our new life. We should be safe, if we’re careful.”

“I know. I’m just scared something will wreck our respite from all of the strife for the last I don’t know how long. I guess ever since the Danilov pack came to Southern California, even before I met you.”

“Babe. Don’t beat yourself up like that. Like Leon said, they’ve never lost anyone in the WITSEC program who was obeying the rules.”

“He wanted us to run a coffee shop. He had to stretch the rules to accommodate our desire to stay in law enforcement-related careers. Now, we’re going out in public with our shields and T-shirts. What if someone posts a video of us to YouTube or something?”

“It’s going to be a fast takedown. Whatever people photograph, it will only be a few seconds long.”

“I’d feel better if we were going in as plainclothes.”

“That’s not playing by the rules. But, say we did go incognito. What kind of takedown do you have in mind?”

“I’ll just follow her to the bathroom and when she’s washing her hands, I’d take her down and drag her outside the public restroom so you can help me, if I need help.”

“That’s not wise or very smart. We need to do this together. And by the rules. Shields showing with our new fake names and all. And both of us on the takedown. I don’t want any trouble with our methods that might screw us from making this into a viable business.”

She sighed. “Okay, Mr. By-the-Book Cop. We’ll do it your way.”

“Thank you.”

***

As it turned out, Karina ended up saving “Janie Bates” from sexual assault in the women’s restroom in the park—she and Jack also ended up taking down her two assailants who had tried to inject her with something in the park restroom with the intent to rape her. She screamed bloody murder and had knocked the syringe to the floor. Karina and Jack had gone running in after her when she screamed.

Karina and Jack ended up calling the local police department, introduced themselves with their new names and showed their licenses. They then handed off Janie’s assailants to the two strapping Mesa cops who said they’d been trying to catch these two rapists for a month now.

While Karina held a baggie of ice cubes to Janie’s swelling eye, and Janie was thanking them, the Mesa cops had asked what had brought them to the park. As in, who were they after.

Jack sighed and said, “We believe that the victim of these guys,

Janie Bates, sitting right here, is really Jameson Delmar Burkland, from the FBI's Most Wanted list."

Janie's mouth dropped open. She stammered something unintelligible and tried to get up, but Karina pushed her back down to the picnic table. "Sit tight, J.D. You're not getting away now."

"I'm Janie Bates, and I have been all my life."

"I guess fingerprints will resolve that argument, one way or another," said the Mesa cop who didn't look surprised at all.

She was quiet then.

Karina said to the Mesa cops, "We actually came to the park after an FBI cold-case to bring a murderer and an armored car robber in, and it just happened that *she* was in need of *our* help."

"Are you or are you not Jameson Delmar Burkland?" the other Mesa cop asked Janie.

The answer they got from Janie was, "I want my lawyer now."

Jack got out his handcuffs as Karina pulled the suspect's hands behind her back.

"We'll take care of that," they were told and soon, their Most Wanted perp had Mesa Police Department cuffs snapped on behind her back and they were calling for a second car to take her off separately from her would-be assailants. "We'll deliver to booking, too. And we'll call the FBI." The Mesa cops read her rights to the perp.

"Before you take her away, we need to file some paperwork for the FBI Most Wanted reward," Jack said. "At your station, right?"

"Of course. The devil's in the details." One cop turned to the other and they did a rock-paper-scissors to see who would deal with the paperwork.

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Chapter Twenty-two

Hours later, Karina and Jack ate dinner at Kokopelli, a local Gold Canyon restaurant, and then drove home to get ready to go on their monthly werewolf run in the Superstition Mountains.

"Think we'll get the reward money?" Karina worried.

"We'll see. I'm pretty sure we did our part of the paperwork right. I dealt with it a time or two in California when bounty hunters brought in perps for us to process. It should be pretty straightforward here, too."

"You'd think that, but I worry that something might go wrong. It's a lot of money."

"I know. I think we're good, though," Jack reassured her.

She nodded. "Think we can make that much money in a day again?"

He laughed. "I don't know. How about we take a week off and just enjoy life?"

"Okay. But I want another bounty case, soon. That felt good, like we were helping."

"We are helping make the world a better place." He hugged her. "But let's ease into this, Karina. Every day doesn't have to be spent saving the world."

"Yes, it does," she said. "For you, too, cowboy. Don't lie!"

He laughed and kissed her. "We know each other very well."

She agreed.

He said, "Let's go outside and watch the sky show. We've got a bit of time to kill before the full moon rises."

"All right. You know that you can suppress changing, now that you have the attributes of a born werewolf, thanks to Babushka's sneaky witch spell."

He smiled. "That was an unexpected gift from her. And yes, I know we don't have to transform at all."

"I suppressed it for years when my grandmother didn't want me to run with the pack. She thought they were ruffians and were responsible for getting me shot by a werewolf hunter."

"They sort of were. You told me that long ago. But I *want* to transform. I want to run in the wilderness with you and just feel the power of the Alpha wolf in me."

He kissed her softly at first and then, with passion. "Let's go outside."

They went outside to their patio to watch the sun set and reflect its stunning red light off the nearby cliffs.

"It's so stunning here," Karina said.

"I like it here, too. I'm glad we came to Arizona," Jack said,

putting his arm around Karina.

"Me, too." She paused. "I think it's a good place to start over. We have work. We have a home. We have a life free of strife."

"I don't know about that last part. Today was a bit intense," Jack said. "I was worried about you since it hasn't been that long since—"

"Since we lost Babushka and our baby?" She squeezed his hand. "I'm okay, or getting there, slowly but surely."

He nodded. "You know you can talk to me about anything. Anytime you want."

"I know. It takes a long time to process death. A lot of it is internal pain, suppressed in this stoic way because I'm Russian. We tend to hold things in, as if it makes us somehow nobler to do so."

"That's not healthy, babe. To hold it all in and tamp it down."

"It's Russian tradition."

"I'm here for you, Karina. Let's make that a new tradition."

"Thanks, Jack."

"I want to talk about something. Actually, two things."

"Okay," she said. "Talk."

He sat on the porch swing, pulled her into his lap and nuzzled her neck and kissed it tenderly.

She laughed. "Oh, you mean that kind of talking about something."

"Yeah, that kind. We haven't made love since we left California."

She nodded. "Since Babushka died and the miscarriage."

"Yes. Are you feeling okay these days, physically?"

"I'm a werewolf. We're fast healers, as you know." She was silent after that.

After long moments, he said, "I sense this hesitation about intimacy that was never there between us before. And if you are all healed up from the miscarriage…"

"Making love with you is beautiful, Jack. You know me. I'm hot for you. I enjoy the heck out of making love with you."

"But your emotional state is still in a flux?"

"Yeah. That and something else."

"Tell me what's going on and maybe I can help. I don't want to be intimate if you aren't in the mood or just tell me if you need more time to process all that's happened to us."

She sighed.

"That sigh sounds serious."

She hid her face in his shoulder for long moments and then raised her head to meet his eyes. "Every night, I curl up in your arms and it is the safest and sweetest place in the entire world."

He nodded for her to go on.

"I'm a powerful werewolf in my own right, an Alpha female, I

suppose, but there's nothing like feeling that protection of an Alpha male. Of you. And knowing that you love me and care for me and that you genuinely like me has been this amazing journey of the heart and soul and mind. Every night when we go to sleep, it feels like this life cannot get any better, and the next day, it does. I feel like I am in a dream state sometimes, in this new life with you. It's freedom and exhilaration and fulfillment in so many ways."

"Except one?" he asked.

She nodded. "Do you know what it is that is bothering me?"

"I think so. You're worried about getting pregnant and changing what we have between us. This good and right feeling that we fit each other. You're afraid of changing our dynamic. With a child."

"Yes, and related to that, I also worry that any child that we bring into the world will be vulnerable to our enemies and make us more vulnerable, too."

"You don't want to have children with me?" Jack asked.

"I do, Jack, but not now. Please don't be hurt."

"I see. Do you ever want to have a family of our own?"

"Maybe, when I feel like no one is hunting us down and trying to kill us. It could be years from now."

He held her against his heart. "I do understand."

"You do?"

"Yeah, we're on the same exact page. I just didn't know how to approach you about it."

"Oh. Does it make you sad, too, though?"

"No, sweetheart. You're enough for me. More than enough. If a child comes from our lovemaking, you know I would love it with all my heart, but if we never have a family, well, you're already my family."

Her eyes glimmered with happy tears. "You are the kindest and strongest man I have ever known. Those qualities usually don't come together."

He gently kissed her. "I'm just me."

She threw her arms around his neck. "I hope you won't be annoyed with me for using special herbs that will suppress my werewolf fertility."

"That daily stinky tea you drink from Babushka's recipe?"

She laughed softly. "You knew?"

"I had a sip from your steaming mug one time when you weren't looking. No one would drink that tea for pleasure. It had to be some sort of hocus-pocus. I assumed that much."

She laughed louder. "Yeah, it tastes pretty nasty. I had to drink it for a month straight and now, I'm safe to play again, as the saying goes."

He offered, “I could use protection, so you wouldn’t have to drink that special tea every day.”

“No, I want to feel you completely naked inside of me. No barriers. Skin on skin, inside and out.”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

“Make love now?” she said huskily.

He let a long sigh out. “Please.”

“Let’s go inside. We do have neighbors.”

He stood to carry her into the house and was surprised to see a tall man blocking his way on the patio.

“Ivan?” Karina whispered.

The man raised a gun and pointed it at them. “No, it’s Igor.”

“Igor?” A shudder went through Karina. “What do you want with us?”

“I want you, Karina. I want to create a new pack and I choose you for my Alpha female.”

“No, I’m with Jack. You know that.”

Jack pushed Karina behind him. “Stay behind me.”

“No!” She gulped and started slowly toward Igor. “Igor, lies do not become you. Why are you really here?”

“To make sure that your bloodline stops here and now. That there will be no more Romanovs, ever.”

Hot tears sprang to her eyes. “You’re really with them, the Bolsheviks? Why? Why, Igor, are you tormenting me? You killed my unborn child! Haven’t you done enough damage?”

“All but the silver bullet to your heart.”

“No!” Jack roared and in an instant, he burst from his clothing, changed to his werewolf form and bowled over Igor. Somehow, the gun went off and the silver bullet went wild as Jack first viciously attacked the man, Igor, and then, suddenly, two male werewolves were fighting.

Karina stayed in her human form and grabbed the gun that Igor had dropped. She made sure that the bullet in the chamber was indeed silver and then stood in her shooting stance, waiting for an opportunity to fire on Igor.

The two werewolves were furiously battling, right there in her back yard. She aimed the gun, but the two of them were blurs of teeth and claws and blood and saliva and she was very afraid she would shoot Jack by accident.

Just as it seemed that Jack had Igor by the jugular, U.S. Marshal Leon Petrillo burst into the back yard and fired off several shots in quick succession. Karina screamed and ran to the bloody werewolves. She pulled Igor off Jack by his huge tail. But Igor was already dead. And he stayed completely still in his werewolf form.

Jack changed back into his man form and he was bloody and panting and wounded, but alive. She ran into his arms. “Jack! Oh my God! You could have been killed.”

“I’m all right. I was just protecting you.”

“I know you were. You—”

He kissed her hard. “You okay?”

“Yes, just frightened out of my wits.” Karina looked at Leon. “What are you doing here lurking around our house?”

“We had intel that Igor was ousted from *Bratva* and that he was looking for you, Karina. I came to protect you.”

“But how did Igor even know where to find us?” Jack said, wrapping a pool towel around his waist to cover himself.

“How did he know?” Leon echoed hesitantly.

“Yes, Leon, how *did* Igor know how to find us?” Jack insisted.

Leon didn’t answer at first and Jack got in his face. “What is this, man? A setup?”

“We gave Igor your address through one of our operatives who acts as an informant.”

“What?” Karina said. “How could you set us up like that? I thought you were supposed to protect us.”

Jack said, “You wanted to take him down, so you used Karina for bait?”

“Yes,” Leon said quietly. “You weren’t in any real danger and we made sure that Igor didn’t pass on intel about you to *Bratva*. He was completely gone from them and was acting on his own, a rogue, when he came to your house.”

Jack said, through gritted teeth, “If you ever, *ever* pull a stunt like that again and put Karina at risk—”

“Don’t say it, Jack. I know you’re upset and you have every right to be.”

“I don’t want to run again, Leon. There better never, ever be anything like this happening again. You want to take out some asshole in the Russian mafia, you do it the *right* way.”

“I did. I had to set up a situation where I would have a justified shooting.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Jack said.

“Neither did I,” Karina said.

Jack continued, “This is our home, Leon. Our safe place. If you don’t mind, can you just take your dead werewolf and leave now?”

“Sure. Let me just give the cleaners a buzz. They’re parked in the neighborhood and they can be here in a jiffy.” He texted them to come over.

Karina and Jack shook their heads in dismay.

“We’re going for a full moon run, Karina and I, and when we come

back, I want you gone and your justified shooting victim gone. And I want all of this blood and torn fur and strife to be gone. We've had enough of things like this in our lives."

"Things like what?"

"Betrayals."

"Betrayals? I didn't betray you. I'm just doing my job."

"Not the way I would have done it. You used Karina for bait, you son of a bitch. Don't put her at risk again or you might have a hard time finding us to testify when you bring down *Bratva*. The Bolsheviks."

"Understood," Leon said.

Karina gulped. "Come on, Jack. Full moon is going to rise in a minute or two. Do you feel it?"

"Yeah. I feel it to my very bones." He looked at Leon again. "You aren't much of a hero, you know."

"No, that's your job, Jack. You're the Alpha. I'm just a weak werewolf without much power."

"I'm sure it sucks to be the Omega wolf, but what you did tonight was nothing short of almost getting us killed with your stupidity and usury."

Leon swallowed hard and wrung his hands. "I'm truly sorry."

"It seems like you are. Did some higher-ups come up with this dumb stunt?"

Leon breathed easier. "Of course. And we just took out one bad-ass mofo."

"There will be others who come looking for him."

"No one will look for Igor. No one. The guy had not a friend in the world."

"He has a twin brother who spared his life, even though he knew that Igor was evil."

"Where is Ivan? He's left a trail of twenty dead vampires."

Karina said, "We truly don't know where he went. He told me goodbye and that he would never see me again."

"Where was that?"

"When I was in the hospital."

"What? How did he get past the guard at your door?"

"He used the window."

"Six stories up?" Leon asked, shocked.

Karina said, "You, American werewolf, have seriously underestimated how dangerous and ingenious Russian werewolves are."

"Apparently so. By the way, nice teamwork on the bounty hunting today, bringing in an FBI Most Wanted fugitive."

Jack nodded. "If you can pull some strings to make sure we really

receive our hundred-grand bounty reward from the FBI, your support in that matter would go a long way toward our forgiveness of your massive blunder here tonight."

"Point taken. I'll get it expedited right after the cleanup team finishes here with Igor."

"See that you do." Jack paused. "Come on, Karina. Let's let the man do his job."

Jack turned into his werewolf form and leapt the back yard fence, loped across King's Ranch Road, and headed for the base of the Superstition Mountains. Karina followed suit, grabbed their clothing in her jaws, and ran to catch up with him, just as the full moon rose in the clear Arizona night sky.

Karina and Jack ran up and up, higher and higher into the mountains until they stood, panting, on the top of the wedge-shaped rock called the Flatiron, which overlooked the near-absence of streetlights of Gold Canyon on one side and the twinkling of many streetlights of Apache Junction, Mesa and Phoenix on the other side, far, far below.

When Jack flopped his massive werewolf body on the warm ground to take in the magnificent view, Karina lay next to him, her head resting over his shoulders and her long ears pricked forward affectionately.

A great horned owl soared above them, his baritone hoots echoing a lonesome sonata in the night sky as it echoed off the rock formations. Toward the east, as far as the eye could see was a tableau of stunning primitive beauty that encompassed Arizona's vast and empty wilderness that lay surprisingly just beyond a bustling metro area of more than four million people. This part of Arizona was raw, untamed…and it was now home. It would take more than the likes of Igor and the Bolsheviks to get Jack and Karina to uproot themselves again. And Leon Petrillo had hopefully learned his lesson and wouldn't cross them again, not if he wanted them to eventually testify when they rounded up Babushka's killer and her accomplices.

When Karina raised her head to the sky and let loose a wolf howl at the moon, Jack lent his deeper howl to her voice. In an instant, everything that had brought them here together to this place and to this moment, flashed through Jack's mind. Together, they howled their stories of the past and of the present… and of their dreams of an eternal future together.

As the full moon shone down on them with its silvery light, Jack's heart was full of gratitude that he was a werewolf—and that he was with Karina. Two Alphas with no pack life was just fine with him.

Not the pack life, nor royal werewolf bloodlines, nothing but this land and me and Karina in it, this new beginning, is what we will inherit, Jack

thought.

Karina must have been tuned into his thoughts, because Jack heard her say in his mind: *Whatever we make of what we are given—that is our werewolf legacy, Jack. That is our legacy.*

Until the full moon set, they stayed on top of the Flatiron summit overlooking their new territory. As daybreak bled in red and gold across the Arizona desert sky, Karina and Jack ran free...

The End

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Chapter 1

Samantha Moon was watching *Judge Judy* while using a Dremel to round off her jet-black, pointy vampire fingernails. In her usual brash style, Judge Judy was reaming out a woman for assaulting her roommate over missing Tupperware when Sam's phone rang. She paused the show, turned off the power tool, and answered the call.

"Moon Investigations. Samantha Moon speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi," said an unfamiliar deep male voice. "I heard you do surveillance-type investigations."

"That's one of my most requested services," Sam replied, "believe it or not."

"I believe it."

"Did you see one of my online ads? I've been trying that out."

"No, a friend gave me your name and number."

"One of my former clients referred you?"

"No. A cop. Detective Sherbet. He said he's worked some cases with you and you're the best at surveillance he's ever met."

Vampires usually are. "We've solved some interesting cases together. How do you know Detective Sherbet?"

"He calls me 'the pusher.'"

"Excuse me?" Sam replied.

"I own a donut shop that he frequents, when he's not cheating on me at another donut shop, that is."

She almost laughed but restrained herself. "Now, there's a steady customer for you."

"He says my pink frosted donuts are addictive. Over the last ten years, he's come into my shop two or three times a week."

I'll bet he does. "That was nice of him to give you my name. May I know yours?"

"Sorry, of course. My name is Tyrone Tarkington."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Tarkington?"

"You can call me Tyrone."

"Thank you, Tyrone. You can call me Sam." She waited patiently for him to unload his baggage. When he didn't, she finally said, "Can you tell me the purpose of the surveillance?"

He sighed. "I called you because I think my wife is cheating on me."

"I'm sorry to hear that." She tried not to think of her cheating ex, Danny. "I can help you, but I'll need more details. A photo or two, the year, color, make and model of her car, names of her health clubs or hair salons, the name of her employer, things like that. And if you

agree to my price, I'll need a retainer and a signed contract."

"What's your price?" he asked.

"Are you and your wife local?"

"We're in Fullerton."

"That's where I'm located, too. It's three-fifty a day for local spouse surveillance—a three-day retainer is required. It shouldn't take me any longer than that."

"That's a reasonable price and policy."

"I'm actually giving you the friend discount since you're Sherbet's donut dealer."

He chuckled, but there was bitterness behind it. "Thanks. So, have you followed a woman before?"

"Yes. This won't be my first time following someone's wife. It shouldn't take me long to get evidence. Will you want photos?"

"No, I don't need—or want—photos of her actually cheating on me. I just need verbal confirmation if she's seeing someone else, so I can proceed with a divorce. California is a no-fault state, and we don't have a prenuptial agreement or anything that would require tangible evidence of infidelity. And I really don't want to drag her reputation through the mud—I wouldn't want her to lose her job, which she loves."

"I doubt she would lose her job."

"Well, her employer would frown on adultery, especially if it happened on the clock."

"I see. That does put a different spin on it."

"Sam, I just need to know for myself. If she's cheating, we don't need to make a federal case out of it."

"Really?" Sam said.

"Yes. She's a private person and even if she's cheating on me, I don't want to destroy her in the eyes of everyone who knows her."

"That's considerate of you, perhaps more than she deserves if she's cheating on you." Sam thought of Danny again and wished she hadn't because it did no good to be angry at a dead man.

Tyrone continued, "I don't want to make a lot of drama because it's about our family, too. Protecting them, I mean, from any fallout. We have three grown children and a grandchild on the way. There's no need to shame her or harass her if she's fallen for her partner."

Sam envisioned a law partner. "Her partner at work?"

"That's who I think it is. I've met him a few times in social situations like employee barbeques and baseball games. Frankly, he doesn't seem like the cheating type either."

"People act differently outside of social gatherings," Sam said. "However, how they act in private, one on one, is who they really are."

He hesitated. “You said a mouthful.”

Sam nodded. “Tell me about your wife.”

After a few seconds, he said, “Amber is the kind of woman who would have to be in love in order to cheat. She and I have been married for twenty-five years, so I just have to know if she still loves me or not. And if she doesn’t, I’m just gonna sell the donut shop and leave this marriage quietly. Maybe I’ll get an RV and go on all those trips we talked about, but never did because of the donut shop and her job, too.” His voice trembled.

Sam felt sorry for him. “You sound pretty darn reasonable for a guy whose wife may be cheating on him.”

“I’ve seen a marriage therapist once a week for a month. She wouldn’t go with me. The therapist advised me to get to the truth and not waste any more negative emotion on what might not even be reality.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Sam agreed. “Have you followed her?”

“No. She’d definitely notice. Plus, stalking is a serious crime, even if it’s your spouse.”

“Sounds like we’re on the same side here,” Sam said.

“I hope I can keep taking the high road. I’m trying to come to terms with it all—if this infidelity even exists. I think it does, though, because she doesn’t want me anymore. In *that* way.”

“Understood,” Sam said quietly. That was one of the first signs of a cheating spouse. “You’re right.”

“Thanks for understanding,” Tyrone said. “We’re both in our early forties, still young enough to want intimacy, despite the first grandchild on the way. It’s killing me, Sam, that we’ve spent more than two decades together, only to get to this point where our lives together might end.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” *I know how that is.*

“Thanks,” Tyrone said. “I do want to warn you that this case might be a little more difficult than you expect, so I don’t know if that changes the price of your investigation for the extra work it’ll take to follow her.”

“Why would you think her surveillance would be more difficult than usual?” Sam asked.

“Well, she’s a cop.”

Uh-oh. “Okay, then.” That gave her a little pause, but she knew she could handle it. “I can follow a cop. It might be a little more difficult but no price change.”

“Well, there’s more. She’s an undercover cop. In plainclothes and driving an undercover car. Sometimes several different cars during her work hours.”

“That could be a challenge, but I can handle it. What department does she work in?”

“Narcotics. Sometimes, her cases overlap with the robbery or homicide departments, but I trust Detective Sherbet in Homicide to keep it confidential that I planned to hire you.”

“You can trust Sherbet. Do you really think she’s cheating on you during her work hours?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s exactly when she does it because that’s when I sleep. Running a donut shop, I’m early to bed and early to rise, pardon the baking pun.”

“I bet you have a lot of jokes about donuts and bakeries.”

“I do. If I wasn’t so depressed, I could probably do standup comedy about being a donut maker.”

Sam smiled and let him keep talking.

“Sam, you’d have to follow her and figure out if she’s really working undercover all those extra hours—or just playing around on me on the clock at work.”

“That would be exceptionally bad for her career, too.”

“I agree. If you haven’t figured it out yet, she works the graveyard shift for the Fullerton PD.”

Perfect. “My night vision is excellent. In fact, I do my best surveillance after sunset.”

“Detective Sherbet did tell me you prefer to work nights.”

“That’s correct. Okay if I email you my contract?”

“Sure.” He gave her his email address.

“Thanks. Hang on a sec.” It just took her just a few seconds to customize the contract template and email it to him. “Okay, I sent it.”

Sam heard the ding of his email app.

“Got it. I’ll read it right away.”

“Great. Tyrone? Let’s meet up.”

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Chapter 2

Sam texted Kingsley Fulcrum, her werewolf lawyer boyfriend: *I have a new case, so I can't meet you tonight at Versai for wine and sympathy. Can we take a rain check?*

Within a minute, she got a text back: *Sure. Catch up with me when you can and next time, I'll make it drinks and dinner.*

She texted back: *Now you're talking. XOXO. TTYL.*

It was just after 6 p.m., and Sam was feeling stronger and feistier than she ever felt during the daylight hours. Between midnight and 2 a.m., her vampire strength would hit its peak. She wore a special alchemy ring that let her go out into the sun, but, to a vampire, there was no time of day as welcoming as a just-completed sunset.

There was no fresh blood here at Tyrone's Donuts, except inside her new client's veins. Her vampire energy nearly crackled with excitement, spurred on by Elizabeth, the dark entity living inside of her. Elizabeth was telling her that the donut man's blood would be the sweetest blood she had ever tasted. Sam licked her lips but silently told her entity, *Shut the hell up and stay down there in your dark corner, you conniving bitch.*

Unlike most other vampires, who had to either find a willing feeder or head to the streets for a blood meal from a random victim taken by force, Sam had a second alchemy ring, one that allowed her to consume regular food. However, the blood hunger still always simmered just beneath the surface of her conscious thoughts. Her physical needs were met by regular food, but the psychological addiction to blood was apparently forever.

After they introduced themselves, Tyrone Tarkington turned the shop's door sign to the *We're Closed* side, locked them inside and brought Sam a generous pink box of donuts.

She peeked inside the box. "Oh, an assortment! Thank you. They smell heavenly."

"And the smell is just the beginning. By the way, I have a big exhaust fan that vents out the donut aroma into the neighborhood. It makes people show up."

Sam smiled. "How could they not?"

Sam and her new client—a still good-looking, but middle-aged, sandy-haired guy with blue eyes and a just a few extra pounds around his midsection—sat in a back booth of his closed donut shop. The display cases were empty and crumb-free, the customers were gone, and the tables, chairs and even the floor were whistle-clean. Tyrone and Sam were now drinking the last of what might have been the world's best coffee out of to-go cups.

The client contract was already signed, folded up and sitting between them on the table, along with his retainer. Sam was pleased to see Tyrone was this efficient and speedy.

"Cash?" she said.

"Well, I don't want my wife to see a check written to Samantha Moon, Private Investigations. We have a joint checking account."

"Of course." Without counting it, Sam put the donut-scented, rubber-banded cash in her laptop briefcase, along with the contract. "Thanks, Tyrone, for signing that before I even got here. And thanks for the donuts, too." She grinned. "My kids will enjoy these. In fact, they'll probably wolf them down in one evening."

"My feelings would be hurt if they didn't. Do you eat donuts?" he asked.

"Sometimes, but if I indulge in one, I make myself jog an extra mile or exercise for an hour."

"I should do that, but then I would have to jog, oh, eight miles a day," he said. "Or eleven, if I'm being completely truthful."

"Eleven donuts a day?" Sam smirked.

"I do have a treadmill at home, but I'm on my feet so long at this shop that I only use it about three times a week—only for about the time it takes for me to watch the national news and get tired of it and hop off."

Sam said, "It would be hard to work in a place with so much deliciousness around. I don't know how you do it."

"I don't know how to do anything but bake. I was raised working in this shop and so was my dad. My grandfather, also named Tyrone—I'm the third one—started the business back in the day when Fullerton had more walnut and orange trees than it did people. But my grown kids—all gluten-free vegans—have taken no interest in the family business. As a one-man show, I've had to scale back to making only eight kinds of donuts per day. Next year, I might only make six kinds. Or five kinds. I'm not sure yet. I'm a little exhausted."

"I don't blame you. It's a lot of work to run this business on your own, I'm sure. But if you ever stop making the pink-frosted donuts, what will Detective Sherbet do?"

"Probably lose weight and live longer." He paused and wagged his dark-blond eyebrows. "Me, too, for that matter. I'm getting a little long in the tooth to be eating donuts all day. It's starting to show." He patted his little tummy.

She gave him a wry grin. "Not so much that I noticed," she lied a tad. "So, did you bring photos of your wife?" Sam asked, trying to be polite but also get her own business done in a timely manner.

"I did. I scanned and printed these pictures on computer paper in the back office, so you can keep them."

“You have your wife’s pictures in the back office?”

“I do, and pictures of my kids, too.”

“That’s sweet,” Sam said.

“That’s me. Mr. Sentimental.” Tyrone opened a manila folder and pushed two eight-by-ten photos of his wife across the table. She was not young, but she was still very striking with her shiny, dark salt-and-pepper straight hair cut in a chic bob. She had an angular chin with a stubborn dimple in the center and intense green eyes.

Sam perused the photo printouts. One portrait was older, with her in a police uniform. The other was really old, one of those glamour studio portraits that used to be all the rage in shopping malls, back in the ‘80s. In that one, her makeup had been professionally applied and she looked a bit stiff, as if it wasn’t really to her liking that her bare shoulders were showing in a sparkly evening gown that looked a little scratchy. Or that her hair was extra poufy-looking in a teased up-do. The makeup artist had gone a little overboard on the eyeliner, too, but Sam could see she was a knockout when she was younger.

“She’s beautiful,” Sam observed.

“Even still. Amber takes care of herself. Always has. She still looks almost the same as when we got married, except she quit getting her hair permed. Me? Not so much. By the time the sun sets, I’m kind of beat and I look it.”

“And at sunset, I’m just waking up,” Sam admitted.

“Amber, too. She’s a night owl, for sure.” Tyrone hesitantly lifted his gaze from the portraits of his wife to Sam’s face. “Have you changed a lot over a decade?”

Sam said, “I’ve been told I’ve gotten a bit paler over the years.”

Tyrone scrutinized her skin. “You probably just need to get outside more in the daytime,” he suggested. “Put some roses in those cheeks.”

“That’ll be the day,” Sam joked.

“Or maybe you can’t go out into the sun for some important reason.” Tyrone’s deep voice went up in pitch, as if he had just noticed something important about her. Something a bit scary. Sam noticed he was looking at her black fingernails with chagrin.

“I’m not really a fan of tanning,” Sam said and put a gentle suggestion in his mind not to notice that she might be a vampire. Almost immediately, Tyrone relaxed.

He said in his regular deep voice, “Yeah, that sun’ll kill you if you get too much of it. I mean, from melanoma, that sort of thing. But I figure that if the donuts don’t get me, the sun and the lawn-mowing on the weekends will.”

“That’s a bit cynical.”

“I like to think of my cynicism as built-in self-control,” Tyrone said with a straight face. “I’d like to be as tough as you, not even daunted

by the thought of following an armed undercover cop."

"Just part of the job, Tyrone. Routine, really."

"Sherbet is the same, just taking in stride the danger of getting up close and personal with suspects. Do you get close to the people you're watching?"

"If I'm doing my job right, your wife won't even notice me watching her," Sam said.

"That's a relief. I don't want her to know about you," Tyrone said.

"Nor do I. That would be pretty embarrassing," Sam said. "Not to mention it could get awkward since my client jobs are confidential."

"That's good." He breathed easier. "You and Sherbet make it seem like the paperwork aftermath is the hardest part of what you do."

Sam did smile then. "You sound as if you have a good rapport with Detective Sherbet."

"Yeah, we're the good guys of the world, sticking together. We're a little round around the edges but kind and mostly patient with other people."

"I applaud you. Sometimes, I lose it with my kids, but by lose it, I don't mean physically."

"I know what you mean. But it gets better as a parent. Just wait until you have a grandkid on the way. Our daughter will be a good mother, even though she's still our little girl to us."

Sam noticed he said, 'our' and 'us.' There was still some hope for this marriage.

"You sound like a good dad and a nice guy, Tyrone."

"Tell that to my wife, who's made her own life without me; what a keeper I am." He frowned. "This cheating thing, if that's what it is, is the worst thing that has ever come between us. I hope you watch her and then come back and tell me it was all a figment of my mid-life crisis imagination."

"I'll get you the truth soon. I can see this is torturing you."

"It is." He pressed his fingers to his temples for a few moments. "Ugh, sorry… high blood pressure makes me get headaches. Or maybe it's all the sugar and carbs I ate today."

"I'm sorry. May I ask you just a few more questions?" she asked gently.

He nodded. "Okay, I'm fine now. Ask me anything."

"Can you tell me more about your wife's background, her upbringing?"

Tyrone rubbed his chin for a moment, thinking. "Amber was raised in a law enforcement family and her own family business also stuck to her like she was vaccinated with it. Donuts and cops. It's in our blood. It's the family joke that our paths seemed pre-destined to cross and keep crossing."

“I know that feeling. Of pre-destiny. No matter how hard you try, it sometimes seems inescapable that someone you fall in love with and grow to love over years and years is going to break your heart.” Sam sighed softly, not something she often did, especially since she didn’t need to breathe. She hardly ever talked to a client in such personal terms, but it seemed that their cheating spouses united them in solidarity.

“I just hope she escaped the family curse on both sides,” Tyrone said.

“Family curse?” Sam perked up, thinking he was speaking of something paranormal or supernatural.

“Yeah, the curse that none of our parents survived past their fifties in either the donut shop business or law enforcement.”

“Why not?” Sam asked.

“Heart attacks and diabetes on my side of the family. Violent deaths while on duty on her side.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. My condolences on all your family’s losses.” She relaxed a bit since his family curse was all too human.

“Thank you, Sam. Human life is fragile and fleeting.”

She nodded. “It seems so. Where does your wife hang out when she isn’t working?”

“Amber works out on her days off. That’s usually Fridays and Saturdays, so she’ll be at her gym when her shift is over tomorrow morning at six or so. He opens early, just for her.”

“How nice of the proprietor. Where?”

“A little hole-in-the-wall place called Jacky’s Gym.”

That startled Sam a bit. “Huh. That’s where I work out, too,” Sam said, leaning forward in her seat. “Boxing lessons. That’s my fitness sport.”

“Hers, too. She takes private kickboxing lessons from Jacky, the old guy who owns and runs it.”

“I know his sparring style well. Fullerton is a small world, very small,” Sam mused, wondering if Amber using the same gym was going to be a help or a hindrance to the infidelity surveillance.

“You know what I really miss most about my wife?”

“What?”

“She’s funny, really funny when she gets going. No one else gets my jokes or appreciates them except her. And she makes me laugh, too. If she’s cheating on me, I feel like I might never really have a belly laugh again for as long as I live.”

“Hang in there, Tyrone,” Sam said. “Maybe I’ll end up having good news for you.”

“That would be a miracle, seeing as how I know she comes home to change clothes, but she hasn’t slept at home during the day for

quite a while."

"How do you know that?" Sam asked, interested.

"When I come home from work, she's there, but the bed hasn't been slept in and the hood of her car is warm as if she rushed home to arrive before I do. And she has obviously showered somewhere else, with different shampoo, soap, and body wash than what she uses at home. Also, I carefully make the bed by hiding a white thread in between the tucked-in sheet and the mattress on her side. We have white sheets and a white carpet, so if the thread fell, she wouldn't notice, but it's easy for me to check since I know where I placed the thread."

"That's very observant of you. And very clever."

"I may be just a donut maker, but I watch a lot of *CSI*."

"Me, too."

"And I never see her undressed anymore. She's always wearing long-sleeved turtlenecks, too, which is weird for her since she hates them."

"You think she has a drug problem and she's covering her arms?" Sam asked.

"It would be unlike her, but I gotta wonder just what the heck she's hiding under there."

"I'll let you know if I see anything like that, I mean… *tracks.*"

Tyrone grimaced. "She would have easy access to drugs since she works in Narco, and she and her partner are the ones who bag up the evidence from drug busts."

"Oh, dear, I hope it's not that."

"You and me both. That would be worse than infidelity. I don't wish any harm to come to her."

He still loves her. "Good to know. What's her partner's name at work?"

"Detective Kevin Holden."

She pointed to her temple with an index finger. "Got it, Kevin Holden."

Sam's cell phone rang, and her eyes flicked away to her phone. "I'm sorry, Tyrone. I have to take this. My daughter's high school guidance counselor is calling. *Again.* I swear, she must have me on speed-dial by now."

Tyrone raised an eyebrow and began to clear off their empty paper coffee cups. "I'll get out of your way. Take the call, Sam. Family comes first. The counselor is calling awfully late, though."

"That's never a good sign, is it?" Sam said and answered her phone.

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Return to the Table of Contents

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Eve Paludan lives in Arizona, where she writes fiction, enjoys reading mysteries and romances, and taking scenic photos. She also swims a lot.

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Return to the Table of Contents

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